
Gakusen Toshi Asterisk Volume6

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These are the novel illustrations that were included in volume 6

学戦都市

06. 懐国凱戦
かいこくがいせん

三屋咲ゆう

illustration: okiura



三屋咲ゆう

学戦都市
アスタ

illustration: okiura

06.
懐国凱戦

かいこくがいせん





星導館学園

天霧綾斗 【あまぎり・あやと】



星導館学園高等部へ転入してきた特待生。のんびりしているが、莫大な星辰力と突出した剣才を持つ。

二つ名: むらくも《叢雲》
純星煌式武装: セルベレスタ《黒炉の魔剣》

ユリス=アレクシア・フォン・リースフェルト *Jullis=Alexia van Riessfeld*



リーゼルトニアの王女にして星導館学園の序列五位。綾斗とタッグを組み、《星武祭》の制覇を目指す。

二つ名: グリューエンローゼ《華焰の魔女》
煌式武装: 《アスベラ・スピーナ》

クローディア・エンフィールド *Claudia Enfield*



星導館学園の生徒会長。綾斗を学園に引き入れた張本人。いつも穏やかに微笑んでいるが、本人曰く、相当に“腹黒い”らしい。学園内の序列は二位。

二つ名: バルカ・モルタ《千見の盟主》
純星煌式武装: 《パン=ドラ》

沙々宮紗夜 【ささみや・さや】



小学校時代に天霧家の隣に住んでいた綾斗の幼なじみ。つねに眠そうで無表情。大艦巨砲主義であり、巨大銃を自在にスイッチさせて戦う。

二つ名: 未登録
煌式武装: 三十八式煌型擲弾銃ヘルネクラウム、三十四式波動重砲アークヴァンデルス改 ほか

刀藤綺凜 【とうとう・きりん】



中等部一年生。弱冠十三歳にして星導館学園序列一位の座につく。門下生一万を超える刀藤流宗家の末っ子であり、剣術に関しては天賦の才を持つ。

二つ名: しっほうじんらい《疾風刃雷》
煌式武装: なし(日本刀「千羽切」を愛用している)

夜吹英士郎 【やぶき・えいしろう】

新聞部に所属する事情通の少年。綾斗とは寮の同室。特務機関《影星》所属。

レスター・マクフェイル *Lester MacPhail*

コルネフォロス
《轟遠の烈斧》の二つ名を持つ。序列九位。

ランディ・フック *Randy Hooke*

レスターのタッグパートナー。

谷津崎匡子 【やつざき・きょうこ】

綾斗たちのクラスを担当する女性教師。かつては《獅鷲星武祭》を制したこともある実力者。

前巻までのあらすじ

《鳳凰星武祭》準決勝——紗夜と綺凜は、善戦するもアルディ・リムシタッグに惜しくも敗れてしまう。

その一方で、フローラの誘拐が発覚し、犯人に《黒炉の魔剣》の封印を要求されてしまう。

不利な勝負に臨む綾斗とユリスだったが、紗夜や綺凜らの活躍によりフローラを取り戻すことに成功。

《黒炉の魔剣》を起動し——見事アルルカントタッグを撃破する。

激戦の末、《鳳凰星武祭》を制覇した綾斗とユリスの元に、リーゼルトニア国王であるユリスの兄から招待の報が届き——

character



アルルカント・アカデミー

エルネスタ・キューネ *Ernesta Kuhne*

アルルカントが誇る落星工学の天才。《彫刻派》筆頭。

カミラ・パレート *Camilla Pareto*

専門分野は煌式武装の研究開発。エルネスタとは腐れ縁の仲。《獅子派》筆頭。

アルディ *"Absolute Refusal" Defended type*

エルネスタによって作られた自律式擬形体AR-D

リムシイ *"Ruinous Might" Cannon type*

エルネスタによって作られた自律式擬形体RM-C



レヴォルフ黒学院

ディルク・エーベルヴァイン *Dirk Eberwein*

《悪辣の王》と称される悪魔的頭脳を持つ青年。レヴォルフ初の非《星脈世代》生徒会長。

桎丸ころな 【かしまる・ころな】

生徒会長秘書。序列外。《星脈世代》だが戦闘能力は皆無。

イレーネ・ウルサイス *Irene Urzaiz*

序列三位。《吸血暴姫》ファミレクシアの二つ名を持つ。

プリシラ・ウルサイス *Priscila Urzaiz*

序列外。イレーネの妹で、非常に珍しい再生能力者。リジェネレイトイフ

オーフェリア・ランドルーフェン *Orphelia Landlufen*

《王竜星武祭》を二連覇し、アスタリスク史上最強の《魔女》と称されるレヴォルフ黒学院の序列一位。《孤毒の魔女》の二つ名を持つ。



聖ガラードワース学園

アーネスト・フェアクロフ *Ernest Fairclough*

聖ガラードワース学園の生徒会長。序列一位。二つ名は《聖騎士》ペンドラゴン。

レティシア・ブランシャール *Laetitia Blanchard*

聖ガルドワース学園の生徒会副会長。序列二位。二つ名は《^{グロリアーラ}光翼の魔女》。

エリオット・フォースター&ドロテオ・レムス

Elliot Forster
&
Darotea Lemus

準決勝で綾斗たちと対戦したガルドワース学園の生徒。序列十二位・十一位。



界龍第七学院

范 星璃 【ファン・シンルー】

界龍第七学院の生徒会長。九歳。序列一位。《万有天羅》の二つ名を持ち、アスタリスク屈指の戦闘力を誇る。

趙 虎峰 【ジャオ・フーフォン】

序列五位。稀代の拳士にして星露の弟子。二つ名は《天苛武葬》。

黎 沈雲・黎 沈華 【リー・シェンユン/リー・シェンファ】

双子の兄妹であり、序列九位（沈雲）と十位（沈華）。二つ名は《幻映創起》と《幻映霧散》。

宋・羅 【ソン・ルオ】

五回戦で綾斗たちと対戦した星璃の門下生。序列二十位・二十三位。



クインヴェール女学園

シルヴィア・リューネハイム *Sylvia Lyneheym*

クインヴェール女学園生徒会長にして序列一位。《戦律の魔女》の二つ名を冠する、前《王竜星武祭》準優勝者。

その他

マディアス・メサ *Madiath Mesa*

《星武祭》運営委員長。各学園のスポンサーである複数の統合企業財体から全権を任されている。

フローラ・クレム *Flora Klemm*

ユリスが支援している孤児院の女の子。十歳。

天霧 遥 【あまぎり・はるか】

綾斗の姉。五年前に失踪。

ヨルベルト *Jolbert*

ユリスの兄にしてリーゼルトニアの国王。

Chapter 1 – Each Beginning

In a room where the moonlight of the late fall illuminated, Claudia deeply sank her body in a sofa.

Her long, rich blond hair had softly become wet and her body which was covered only with a bathrobe had become slightly flushed. A space window for voice communication floated at her side and transmitted a perplexed voice.

“——I’m sorry, but no matter how much you insist, I can’t yield there.”

After Claudia spoke in a calm voice, the person in the other side of the space window repeated the same thing with an irritated tone .

“Yes... Of course, I’m aware of all this. I thank you for the advice.”

Claudia revealed a light smile and casually closed the space window.

And she slowly spat out a breath; lengthily, deeply as if trying to spit out all the dregs which she had in the bottom of her stomach.

Of course, there was no way that what had filled Claudia on the inside would disappear with such a thing.

There was one and only way to deal with it.

“I have finally come this far. What is left is...”



After Claudia spoke and stood up, she headed to the window.

While being flooded with the moonlight which poured down over the thin lace, she hugged her body with both hands.

“Fufufu, like this, there is no turning back.”

She laughed in self-derision and whispered as if to persuade herself.

Claudia’s wish which she held since that day.

The sole hope given to her within her nightmare which continued every night.

There would probably not be a single person who would understand it. Even if it was laughed at for being foolish or discarded at being worthless when she revealed it, she was sure that there was no one who would seriously scramble for it.

After all, even Claudia herself thought so.

But precisely because she had clung to that helpless, foolish and worthless wish, Claudia could exist here like this now.

Whether it was her position of Seidoukan Academy Student Council President, her fame of being ranked #2, her objective of winning the <Gryps>, or in the first place, the fact that she had come to this Asterisk, all of these were merely preparations in order to arrive at her wish.

Even so, it would probably be difficult for Claudia to fulfill her wish. In terms of likelihood, it was fine even if there was one chance in ten thousand.

However, it was not zero.

“——Now, I will have you follow this dance, Ayato. After all, the main stage for me starts here.”

As she said as if savoring it, Claudia quietly closed her eyes.

- -

“By the way, do you guys already have plans for winter break?”

In the school cafeteria, Julis asked that when everyone had finished their lunch.

Since the same members gathered at these seats every day recently, it almost became like reserved seats; but it was not really like they had made the arrangement beforehand.

The school cafeteria where congestion had finally settled was wrapped up in a leisurely atmosphere and perhaps because there was a fine weather, the figures of students who had fallen asleep could be seen.

“...Winter break?”

“It’s still a matter for the future, so I have no plans in particular ...”

Saya and Kirin, sitting side by side in front of Julis, tilted their heads to the side in thought.

It was October now.

They had finished the final exams last month and the short autumn break at the beginning of this month; the period following that had just begun. All the six academies of Asterisk had a semester system — in other words, dividing one year into the first term and the final term, and acquiring credits in both — and an entrance ceremony was also held in the final term. Therefore, recently in this academy, new student-like individuals could also be seen here and there.

“If possible, I want to relax this time...”

Saya said that and wearily put her face down on the desk.

“Haha, Saya had supplementary lessons all the time during the autumn break after all.”

“Muuh...”

Though Saya puffed her cheeks at Ayato’s words, she did not mean to argue.

“Well, on that point, there are no supplementary lessons in winter break, so relax.”

“Are you saying that to yourself, Yabuki?”

“Ugh...!”

At Julis’s words, Eishiro sitting next to Ayato unnaturally averted his eyes.

There was only a considerable difference between Saya’s strong subjects and weak subjects, but for Eishiro, almost all the subjects had a failing mark or one close to it. He seemed to dislike study very much.

Among the members in this place, Julis was the highest ranking, and though not to the extent of Julis, Kirin also left some good results. Ayato was slightly above average.

Although there were not too many things which attention was paid to, the “academic ability” of each academy also influenced the overall results of the <Festa>. All the test results of the season became targets and highly regarded above all else were the results of the <Festa>’s participants. In other words, by restricting the act of attempting to raise the overall results by only letting students with excellent academic ability enroll, it was a measure to make them learn both the literary and military arts.

However, as a matter of fact, the points obtained by academic ability were not so numerous. Each academy was respectively ranked from the first to the sixth place and points were given with it, but even if the regulations placed utmost emphasis towards

academic ability in the past, the points that the #1 ranked academy was able to obtain would not reach that of the people who advanced to the best four of the <Festa>.

And above all else, that was the biggest reason why the rank that had mostly remained unchanged in recent years did not attract attention.

The higher positions of first and second places which were St. Garrardsworth Academy and Allekant Academy, the medium positions of third and fourth places which were Seidoukan Academy and World Dragon Seventh Institute, and the lower positions of the fifth and sixth place which were Queen Veil Girl's Academy and Le Wolfe Black Institute respectively assumed their fixed positions. At least for these past ten years there were no academies which jumped up or down in this ranking.

Even so, there was little difference in academic ability in each position; and for the sake of changing, even if only a little, the amount of points obtained between the third and fourth places, each academy could not also afford to ease up too much in educational guidance.

“So, is there something happening in the winter break?”

When Ayato got back on topic they had strayed from, Julis replied with a complicated expression while looking at the faces of all the members present.

“Actually... due to the matter of Flora the other day, my big brother began to say that he wants to invite you to the country by all means.”

“By country... you mean in Lieseltania?”

“Well, yes. He wants you to come together with me when I’ll return home.”

As Julis nodded, she looked around at each other’s faces.

“It’s — a very great honor, but...”

“If it’s Julis’s big brother, then this means that it’s an invitation from the King of Lieseltania, right?”

It was no wonder that Kirin did not commit herself. Being suddenly invited by his Majesty the King was not something which happened so often in one’s life.

“No, you don’t need to be so nervous. I’ve also told him not to do something formal. It’s just so to give you his words of thanks”

“...For only that, you also make quite a difficult expression, Julis. Aren’t you actually eager about it?”

“Ugh...! N-No, it’s not really that...”

Julis faltered for a moment at Saya’s point, but she slightly shook her head and before long took a breath.

“My big brother... um, how to put it, he isn’t a bad person, but ... he’s a little eccentric. I’m a little worried about whether or not he is plotting something bad again.”

Now that she mentioned it, whether it be about Flora’s maid outfits or about the question that he entrusted her with, it looked like Julis’s big brother was certainly quite a peculiar one.

“But, for having saved Flora, not only my brother, but the sisters of the orphanage have said that they want to directly thank you. For that reason, I’m also not reluctant to invite you guys to our country, but...”

When Julis spoke, she smiled wryly and shrugged her shoulders.

“Well, you guys also have your own circumstances, so I won’t force you.”

Having been told that, Ayato pondered.

In reality, he thought about returning to his home at least for the New Year’s Eve, but to be frank, the relation between Ayato and his father was not that good. This was because after his big sister disappeared, although it was not to the extent to be called serious, they often argued. Since it was his big sister who skillfully mediated his relationship with his father who was a taciturn person and Ayato did not know what he was thinking about, there was probably no helping it in a sense.

Just as a note, he got in touch with him when he won the < Phoenix>, but even that time, there was only a curt reply. Of course, he was thankful to his father and looked up to him as a master, but it was his real feelings to want to take some distance for now.

“Then since it’s a rare opportunity, I will accept the invitation.”

When Ayato raised his hand, Julis nodded somewhat happy.

“I see. I’m sure that Flora will be happy.”

Then, Kirin nervously raised her hand, too.

“Um, if it doesn’t bother you, can I also come?”

“Of course. But, Kirin... um, is it all right with you? Not going to see your father?”

Kirin’s father, in order to protect Kirin when she was young, had killed robbers, and was in penal servitude even now. Although various procedures were usually needed to go out of Asterisk, it was simplified during vacation and became nearly unnecessary. Kirin probably had only opportunities like this to meet him.

“That’s... Actually, I went for a visit during autumn break, but he had scolded me saying that rather than being concerned about him, I should try harder in training.”

Although Kirin said that, she had a relieved expression.

“I also showed up to my home, but thanks to the help of the best disciples regarding the branch dojos of every place, there doesn’t seem to be any problem. The people of Galaxy are also supporting in the management aspect and my great-aunt who returned to the head family from the branch family also put things in order well.”

As expected, when it comes to a structure of the scale of the Toudou Style, there seemed to be difficulties in various ways.

Perhaps because Kirin also had things to think about herself, she declined the official rank battle for the reason “I will retrain once again”. Because she had passed the grace period given to the former top ranking people, the current Kirin was out of the list (non-ranked).

“Therefore, I’m all right.”

“I got it. So, what will you do, Saya?”

“...As expected, it’ll be bad if I don’t show up at home.”

Saya frowned in vexation.

“I’m reluctant to be the only one left out... But, the adjustment of the repaired lux will be done the fastest only if I personally go for it, but...”

In the <Phoenix>’s semifinal — in the fight against Ardi and Rimsi, most of the luxes Saya possessed had broken to the extent that they were unusable. Saya seemed to have sent them back

immediately to her father, but it looked like the repairs were finally finished.

“In that case, how about we first stop by at Sasamiya-san’s house?”

“Uwah!?”

Suddenly being embraced as if being covered from behind, Ayato unintentionally raised his voice.

Of course, since there was only one person who could do something like this, Ayato called the name earlier than confirming who it was.

“You do this each and every time; don’t surprise me like this, Claudia...”

“Fufufu... I’m sorry, it was just by reflex.”

Just as he thought, the person — Claudia slowly separated her body while putting her hand on her mouth.

Still, although his guard was down, she had perfectly taken his back this time, as well.

He knew that Claudia was a formidable lux user, but still the way she erased her presence was not ordinary.

“That’s quite sudden as usual, you... So, what do you mean by stopping at Saya’s home?”

As Julis asked so with a half amazed expression, Claudia raised her index finger with a smile as is.

“There are no airports in Lieseltania, so you’ll enter via Germany or Austria, right? Since Sasamiya-san’s family resides in Munich, I think that there won’t be any problem stopping by there.”

“...You’re well informed, eh.”

“Well, I’m the Student Council President after all.”

Though Saya said as she was slightly surprised, Claudia plainly answered.

“I see, it’s certainly possible like that, but... what will you do, Saya?”

“Hmm...”

After pondering for a while, Saya readily nodded.

“If that’s fine with everyone, then I have no objection.”

“Fufufu, then it’s decided. By the way——”

Claudia who clapped her hands turned her gaze to Julis.

“Am I also included in that invitation?”

“Since when were you listening to our conversation...? Well, whatever. Of course, I intend to tell you, too.”

“Oh, what a relief. I also don’t like being left out after all.”

“Which means that you also intend to come?”

With a surprised face, Julis looked back at Claudia.

“Naturally, it’s my intention.”

“No, as you have probably come several times to Lieseltania as well as the palace.”

“That’s true, but there is the meaning to be with everyone.”

Certainly, they had heard that Claudia was an acquaintance of Julis from before she (Julis) had come over to Asterisk. Judging from the fact that she was familiar with Flora, it was probably not just once or twice that she visited Lieseltania.

“Besides, since it’s a rare opportunity, I would also like to talk to everyone — about next year, that is.”

At Claudia’s words, the air became tense just for an instant.

Now that the <Phoenix> and tests were over, the Asterisk’s topic of focus had already moved to the next <Festa>.

In other words, it was the team battle — <Gryps> which would be held in the next autumn.

First of all, since the members of the composition of the five members for the team battle was important above all else, the

sounding out of those in the vicinity as early as possible, regardless of inside or outside of the academy, started.

Among them, since Julis who was the <Phoenix>'s victor declared aiming for a Grand Slam, her participation to the next <Gryps> was almost confirmed, too. The attraction was gathered about what kind of members she would gather —— of course, also including the trend of her tag partner Ayato —— but there were rumors about whether she would plausibly enter the team of Claudia, the Student Council President. Furthermore, it was a well-known fact that Kirin and Saya were on familiar terms with Claudia, and their abilities were proved in the <Phoenix>. It was the majority's expectation that Claudia might gather these four people.

In fact, Ayato already received her invitation —— but, just having asked indirectly, it looked like the invitation had not yet reached Julis and the others. Be that as it may, when Claudia invited Ayato, she said that she would invite Julis at least. Setting aside whether or not Julis would accept it, there was no mistaking that she was included in the plan for Claudia's team.

“Oops, I'm quite interested in that conversation, Pres. I by all means want to inquire about it in detail.”

Getting into that topic at once was Eishiro.

As a member of the newspaper club, it would be information that he could not overlook.

“Fufufu, by the way Yabuki-kun, what will you do?”

“Huh?”

Claudia evaded Eishiro’s question with a smile and turned it back on him by questioned him back.

“Is Yabuki-kun also included in the invitation, Julis?”

“Yes, that’s right. Lester is as well.”

“He~e, it’s a great honor that someone like me is invited. I haven’t done that much though.”

Eishiro played the fool while whistling, but according to what Saya and Kirin said, if Eishiro was not there, it was doubtful whether or not they would have safely rescued Flora. It could be said that he performed well enough to be invited.

“It’s regrettable, but I’ll have to decline. Although it has finally settled down, I’m still busy with a lot of works. It feels like I’ll have almost no rest, even in winter break.”

As gratitude for the matter of Flora, Eishiro was entrusted with the interview after the <Phoenix>. Ayato had not received that much coverage, but as for Julis, since it had been a complete state of shut-out until then^[1], you might say that Eishiro’s newspaper club almost monopolized her. Therefore, the newspaper club and Eishiro had reached a state which one could only express with the words “swamped period”.

After the <Phoenix>, most of the interview of Ayato and Julis that had been reported throughout the world was from Eishiro.

Originally, there were many times when Asterisk's report system clubs were doing activities that largely exceeded the frame of students, but it could probably be said that the newspaper club this time completed a scoop rarely seen even in Asterisk's history.

As a matter of fact, the ones having benefited the most from the <Phoenix> championship might have been Eishiro and his newspaper club.

This was because, aside from Julis, Ayato had not felt that much of the influence of the <Phoenix> victory. There were appearance requests in TV programs and ads, and things that ranged from fan letters and presents to threatening letters (threats) flooding in from throughout the world, but there were few of them which arrived to Ayato as he left the academy deal with them. Although he attracted attention even within the academy, if anything, he felt like the time when he became rank #1 was noisier; rather the students who directly accosted him after the <Phoenix> victory seemed to have decreased.

It was not also as if something changed in his life; and even what he ordered today was a 500 yen lunch set.

“But well, thanks to you, the club's name became well known, we don't have to worry about the activity funds hereafter for a while and we also have a new sponsor; really as expected of the <Phoenix>'s champs.”

- slap* Eishiro brought his hands together assuming a posture of prayer towards Julis.

“As for me, I think that you guys are more flexible, and it’s certainly more convenient in one way or another. But——”

There, Julis’s eyes tightly twitched upwards.

“If you’ve asked a strange question again this time, I’ll never have accepted coverage from you guys again in the future.”

“I-I know.”

“...Why do you mean by strange question?”

Saya asked to Eishiro who floated cold sweat.

“Ah, no, well it’s that. I thought about inquiring a little further in her relation with Amagiri, but...”

Having seen that Eishiro’s eyes were swimming unsteadily, she understood that it was probably not exactly as he stated.

“Oh, just that? In that case, you should just ask me. Come ask me any time.”

“Eh? No, I think that Sasamiya has already spilled out everything concerning that. There is nothing more I want to ask you now.”

“...Hmm”

Unlike Ayato and Julis, after Saya and Kirin received coverage —— in Saya’s case, it also became advertisement of her father’s luxes, and it was rightly so of course —— it was widely known

that Saya and Ayato were childhood friends because Saya honestly answered anything she was asked.

“The thing about information is that the less people there are who know it, the higher is its value. If you still have Amagiri’s treasured materials left to say, that’s another story though.”

“Treasured materials... Yes, then when we were children, we took bath together...”

“Wah! Saya, wait a moment!”

Ayato hurriedly held down her mouth.

“Bath...”

“Bath...”

Julis’s and Kirin’s gazes were slightly scary.

——Then there, noise suddenly ran in the dining hall.

“Hmm...? I wonder what it is.”

As expected when these members gathered, there were also many people who would look at them surrounding at a distance, but this time all such students had turned their gazes towards the entrance.

“Wha...!?”

The eyes of Eishiro who promptly reacted among all of them and stood up greatly opened wide, and his chin dropped.

As Ayato turned his gaze wondering what it was, two women were coming right their way.

“Ah, that’s right. Though I’m a bit late in saying it, but there is a visitor for Ayato. I came here to convey that.”

Claudia said that at this late hour and laughed.

Among the two women, one was a person whom he recognized.

It was Yatsuzaki Kyouko, in other words Ayato’s homeroom teacher. She was usually a teacher with a somewhat ferocious atmosphere, but now for some reason, she looked slightly tense. The nailed bat which she always carried was nowhere to be found.

The other woman standing beside her seemed to be a little younger than Kyouko. She was a beautiful person with dignified features and she garbed her well-balanced and firm body in a uniform of guard.

Ayato had a feeling that he recognized her face somewhere, but he could not recall.

But, her name which he heard from within the noise made Ayato unintentionally stand up from his chair.

“Guard Captain Helga Lindvall...!”

It was no wonder that Ayato could not immediately recall her face.

Helga Lindvall was certainly a celebrity whom there was nobody in Asterisk that did not know, but she rarely appeared in public after all. Judging only from the pictures Ayato had seen, she was a bewitching, beautiful woman with the figure of a teenage girl similar to students, and, at times, also had the figure of a little girl at a not so tender age.

Her nickname in her school days was <Witch of Time Control>.^{Chrono Themis}

Holding the ability to manipulate time of her own surroundings, she was a person hailed as the strongest Strega in Asterisk's history.

From the fact that she could control her body age, it was said that she changed her age depending on her mission, but it was also more than half a century that Helga won the <Lindvolus> for her first time after all. In reality, it could easily be predicted that she had lived for three times as long as Kyouko.

"...Ah, Amagiri. The Guard Captain seems to have business with you. Sorry, but can I have a little of your time?"

As Kyouko who seemed somewhat uncomfortable said so, Helga quietly held out her right hand.

"Nice to meet you, Amagiri-kun. I'm Helga Lindvall."

"T-Thank you, nice to meet you."

As he confusedly took her hands, it was nearly overwhelmed by her prana at the moment when he touched it. It was a keen-edged prana to the extent that he had never felt so far.

“I want to talk a little with you. — Yatsuzaki, could you lend me a private room somewhere?”

“Ah, yes. Enfield, let them use one guidance room.”

“I got it. Errr... Aside from the N°7 and 8 being busy now, they may use whichever other room they want.”

Claudia who took out her portable terminal quickly checked and answered.

“Yatsuzaki, I can handle it from here alone. When I heard you became a teacher, I was surprised; but I’m relieved that you seem to be doing well as such.”

Helga said that while revealing a small smile on her mouth and patted Kyouko’s head.

“Haha, Thank you for that...”

“Then, shall we go, Amagiri-kun?”

“Eh? Ah, w-wait...”

Helga briskly went ahead as is.

When Ayato looked towards Kyouko, her eyes were telling “go!” with a frightful look.

- -

“Phew...”

When Ayato followed behind Helga after leaving from the dining room, Kyouko weakly sat down on a chair while greatly exhaling.

“Fufufu, to think that the <Witch of Nail Severing> would be that spoilt in front of the Guard Captain.”

“...Shut up.”

To Claudia’s words, Kyouko glared at her with half-opened eyes.

“However, on what kind of business does that Helga Lindvall have with Ayato...?”

“I wonder; I just was just unluckily caught, so I don’t know the reason. You should ask Enfield.”

As Julis who was said so turned her gaze, Claudia shook her head.

“She seemed to want to report some things to the person himself, but I don’t know the details, either.”

“Report...?”

If the garrison moved by something related to Ayato, what came to mind foremost would be the matter of Flora’s kidnapping. They heard from Madiath Mesa, the management committee chairman of the <Festa> that Helga also had a strong interest in it.

But then, she should also discuss it not with Ayato alone, but also Julis.

The fact that it was not so meant...

“Sensei, what kind of relation do you have with the Guard Captain?”

Saya asked Kyouko that.

“Anh?”

Kyouko answered it with a sullen voice, but she curtly responded while scratching her head.

“Long ago, she took care of me in various ways, you know? In various ways.”

“Ah, I’ve heard that Kyouko-chan was quite the mischievous kid in her school days. So it isn’t strange even if a lot of things happened between her and the garrison.”

“Who are you calling Kyouko-chan? I’ll kill you, Yabuki.”

As her bad look gradually became worse, as expected even Eishiro began to sweat and wave both hands.

“I-It’s a joke, I apologize, sorry.”

“...As expected even Sensei can’t win against Helga Lindvall?”

At the time when Kyouko was once a student of Le Wolfe, she was a person who was the leader of the team which won the <Gryps>. Le Wolfe was assumed to be the weakest academy in the <Gryps> and that <Gryps> victory was the only one that it had ever won until this very day.

“Are you idiot? It’ll be obviously an instant kill.”

But when Kyouko plainly said so at Julis’s question, she flutteringly waved her hand as to say that it would not even count as a match.

“But, Kyouko-ch—— Sensei’s ability is specialized to counter an ability user, right? You could hold on for a little while...”

“Haa... you guys don’t understand, huh.”

Kyouko rested her cheek on her hand and looked at Eishiro with an amazed expression.

“Well, the opportunity for the person herself to stand out has also decreased recently, so it’s no wonder that you guys don’t know anything. That person’s strength is an overwhelming close combat ability which was cultivated purely by training for many years. It isn’t the level the likes of me could hope to match.”

“Guard Captain Lindvall is certainly strong, but from our perspective, Yatsuzaki-sensei is a great guide whom we should ask to be taught by. Besides, Sensei should only have the experience that is expected of herself, right?”

Kyouko chuckled at Claudia’s words.

“What, do you want me to train you again?”

“Yes, by all means.”

In contrast, Claudia revealed a calm smile.

“Ah speaking of which, there were rumors that President’s team received Sensei’s secret training for the last <Gryps>.”

“It isn’t really secret. I may look like this, but I’m a teacher of Asterisk, so if you request it, I’ll teach you any time. If you can keep with it, that is.”

With a threatening smile which gave chill, Kyouko looked at Eishiro.

The teachers of Asterisk were greatly classified in two categories. One was the category of those who, aside from being in charge of a subject, could perform a guidance training of battle techniques like Kyouko. The other was composed of only those purely in charge of lesson.

Of course, it was apparent that the former was more of benefit, but it was also a fact that there were not enough teachers in every academy.

“Well, unfortunately in the last <Gryps>, our team has been defeated early.”

“Ah, I think that it couldn’t be helped! After all, your opponent at the time was the first team of the Silvery Wings Knights!”

Exactly as Kirin said, in the last <Gryps>, Claudia’s team clashed against St. Garrardsworth Academy’s team and was defeated. Julis also watched that game, but honestly speaking, it was undeniable that there was a considerable difference in ability. Although Claudia was the only one who struggled hard, the stronghold of the victorious team was not so brittle that it could be destroyed by her alone. Even if they were to fight hundred times with the same members, Garrardsworth would probably win all the hundred times.

In fact, all Claudia’s teammates at that time had already graduated.

“Well, whatever. You can come any time after having completed your team’s preparation. I’ll look after you.”

As Kyouko said so, she left while shrugging her shoulders.

“——By the way, Julis.”

Claudia who saw off Kyouko’s back suddenly turned to Julis.

“W-What is it?”

“About your Aspera Spina, I’ve heard that it couldn’t be repaired in the end.”

“Yes, well it can’t be helped.”

Julis’s lux was seriously damaged during the fierce battle of the <Phoenix> finals. She immediately asked the equipment department for a repair, but she received a communication the other day saying that it was impossible after all. Although Julis herself had half given up, as expected it was painful to part with the partner which she had fought together with for a long time.

Because the adjustment of a lux — and moreover, in the case of the ones used by <Strega> and <Dante> like Julis — took time, one had to apply for another lux as soon as possible; and for Julis, the procedure was advancing now.

“In that case, it’ll be helped if you can serve as the monitor of the new model lux, but... What do you think?”

“New model lux, you say?”

“Are you talking that one which was advancing in the cooperation with Allekant?”

Saya snapped strongly.

“Yes, that’s right. They have finally completed the prototype model, and it is currently under final examination, but... because it

's considerably difficult to handle, we have trouble with the selection of a suitable monitor."

"I don't mind it, but why me?"

"The ability to gauge space is indispensable. And as far as I know, the one who excels the most in it in this Seidoukan is you."

"Hmm..."

Since Julis herself also took pride in that area, she could only nod.

"You aren't the only chosen monitor, so it isn't something to get so worked up about; what do you say?"

Basically, it was best to get accustomed to using any weapon. If it was a thin sword type lux like Aspera Spina, even if it took time for adjustment, she might be able to handle it in the same way (as Aspera Spina).

(But then, there won't be any growth, huh...)

They were able to win the <Phoenix> because Ayato's power was great. Of course, there were also matches that they could not have won if Julis was not there, but the difference in power with Ayato was still obvious.

Julis pondered for a while and reached a conclusion before long.

"Understood. I'll take part in it."

- -

Although Ayato had also been accustomed to attracting attention since the <Phoenix> championship, he had never attracted so much of the public's gazes within the academy.

However, Helga was walking without even showing signs of caring at all about the noise of the students gazing from a distance.

"——I saw the <Phoenix>, but you seem very promising. The final in particular was splendid. If you polish your prana's control technique, you'll grow further."

"Eh? Ah, thank you very much."

Although he was surprised to be spoken to suddenly, he frankly expressed his thanks.

"In the recent years, Asterisk's public order has become relatively stable, but even so the Star Hunter Guards are always short-handed. It'll save me if a young power like you decides to join us."

"E-Errr, um..."

In response to Ayato who was at a loss of how he should answer, Helga knitted her brows together just a little.

“...Ah, sorry. I don’t seem to be that very good at a chatting. Because you were a little tense, I intended to make you relax, but...”

“Haa”

That was slightly difficult with the conversation just now.

At least, her self-evaluation of not being good at chatting seemed to have been proven correct.

“...Well, it’s here, huh.”

When they arrived at a guidance room of the high school building before long, Helga released the lock with experienced hands.

The guidance room had an extremely simple structure and there was nothing other than chairs and a desk. When Ayato, urged by Helga, sat down on the chair opposite to her, Helga cut to the chase at once.

“I think you’ve already guessed, but the talk is about your big sister —— Amagiri Haruka.”

“...Yes.”

Since he expected that, Ayato calmly nodded.

“For starters, I shall explain from the reason why we, the Star Hunter Guards, received the cooperation from Seidoukan Academy about Amagiri Haruka’s investigation. That is because

there is testimony that Amagiri Haruka participated before in the <Eclipse> which is an illegal event, and it is known to no one but us who have been in charge of the investigation. Do you know about the <Eclipse>?”

“I’ve briefly heard about it. That it’s a dangerous armed tournament where one can lose his life.”

“Yes, it is. And to participate to the <Eclipse>, there was a condition that one has to be a student of Asterisk, like in the legal <Festa>.”

“A student...?”

He thought for an instant about what he was meaning, but he immediately remembered a story which he heard from Claudia before.

——His big sister’s data were erased, and nobody remembered his sister.

“In other words, though my sister was given only a school register, she didn’t attend school...?”

“We are also thinking that. But, this is quite an exceptional handling for a contender of the <Eclipse>. After all, most of the contenders seemed to have been regular students.”

Did this mean that his big sister was a special case?

“However... Even Claudia wondered it, but is it really possible to erase the data of such a student who is given an ogre lux in the academy?”

As he asked so, Helga twitchily moved her eyebrows.

“Currently, we still don’t know who the sponsor of the <Eclipse> was but we have a probable guess concerning the aim of that said person.”

“And that is...?”

“Just as a note, it’s a confidential matter, so I want to avoid disclosing it; but, well, it should be fine. In part, it’s already a well-known fact. ——Does the name Danilo Bertoni ring a bell to you?”

“Danilo... No.”

Ayato shook his head.

“It’s the management committee chairman of the previous <Festa>.”

“!”

“Well, it’s no wonder even if you don’t know. After all, unlike the current management committee chairman Madiath Mesa, he hardly came out in public. But, even if his name doesn’t ring a bell, you know at least how he met his last moments, right?”

“It was by accident... right?”

Even Ayato who had no interest in the <Festa> remembered about the accident which became large-scale news. A submerged car was discovered in the harbor block of Asterisk, the management committee chairman’s corpse was found inside —— the news should be certainly that.

“That’s right. Danilo’s influence at that time was tremendous. Operating the students’ data was probably an easy task for him. It isn’t public knowledge, but I can mention as many of his other reckless actions as you want that he did out of self-interest. The <Eclipse> is also one of them.”

Helga took a pause as she took a small breath there.

“But, the person himself, having died, left behind only indirect proof and none were definitive. The Integrated Enterprise Foundation probably either disposed of or concealed it. There was even pressure on the investigation and it was suspended. But as expected, it was impossible to cover everything and Danilo’s bad reputation seems to have been leaked here and there.”

“.....”

“Is there something bothering you?”

To Ayato who was lost in thought, Helga took a stab at arousing his interest.

“——Mr. Danilo was an executive of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation, right?”

“Yes. After all, the Steering Committee is an organization which is composed of each executive class of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation. Danilo was a member of Solneige.”

“Then, didn’t he also receive the mind adjustment program?”

From the story that he heard from Claudia before, the executives of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation were only humans whose self-interest was removed by the mind adjustment program. If so, then the fact itself that Danilo did things for self-interest should be an impossible story.

“Hou, you’re well-informed. The knowledge isn’t that public though.”

Helga nodded in admiration.

“That’s right. The executives of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation which prevent failures caused by the human factor thoroughly carry out more accurate and fair judgments and, above all, all of the executives are required to receive the mind adjustment program in order to create the common ideal of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation. Danilo also received it... but actually, that program’s adjustment level varies depending on the post and position. It’s to the extent that most of one’s humanity is lost the higher ranking executive he becomes, but the adjustment is relatively loose when it comes to a post where a creative judgment

is required. That’s exactly the case for the ones related to the <Festa>.”

“I see...”

“Although the current management committee chairman Madiath Mesa is a member of Galaxy in name only, he’s an exception (oddball) who achieved entering the Steering Committee through his wish from his victory in the <Festa>. There is also the possibility that he hasn’t received the adjustment itself.”

He had heard about these circumstances.

“In other words, Danilo Bertoni’s self-interest was so strong that the adjustment program had no effect?”

“You can also think about it like that, but... Well, I’ve said this much, so it should be fine to reveal it. Actually, we’ve assumed another possibility regarding Danilo’s reckless actions —— Whether or not the ability user of mind operation system was involved in it.”

“No way...!”

There were extremely few <Dante> and <Strega> able to interfere in the consciousness and thought of others. They were even rarer than the healing ability users.

And their management was the strictest, yet thorough even among the ability users. It was probably natural when considering the threat they posed.

“But, this is only a possibility. Even I’ve encountered some people, but the ability of mind operation system isn’t so omnipotent in society that you think. It’s because the ability user must constantly interfere with the target and a <Starpulse Generation> will immediately see through it by the movement of his mana. In addition, there is also the weakness that they are a lot less effective against an opponent from the <Starpulse Generation>.”

It has been said that, since the movement of mana was controlled with prana, the effect of an ability which directly acts on a target and not restricted to only mind operation is weaker on a <Starpulse Generation> who also possessed prana.

“There is no way that counter-measures wouldn’t be taken within the Steering Committee; so if Danilo had received some sort of mind operation, it would have immediately been detected.”

As Helga said that, she suddenly loosened her expression.

“Currently, we’re in the midst of reconsidering, once again, the traces of reckless actions that Danilo has done and areas surrounding them. If new information regarding the <Eclipse> emerges, it may become a clue to look for your big sister. I can’t say to expect good news, but I think I’ll report them at least.”

“Thank you very much.”

Ayato frankly bowed his head.

But, there was also a part that he did not fully understand.

“But... Is it only for that that you expressly came to here?”

Then, a light smile appeared on Helga’s mouth.

“Though I’ll say it like this, I’m grateful to you. Thanks to you, although it is limited, I can once again investigate the Danilo-related matters. The bigwigs of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation seem to feel uncomfortable, but the fact that it was approved by a portion of them means that even if something was disclosed, they judge that they will no longer suffer that serious of a blow from the past events.”

“...Your face is saying that you won’t let things go as they want.”

When Ayato said that, Helga looked at him with slightly surprised eyes.

“Hmm... I see. You have an interesting way of speaking. Now I understand why she took a liking to you.”

“Huh?”

As he wondering what she was talking about, Helga slightly knitted her brows.

“No, never mind... will be irresponsible for me to say it, huh... Let’s see, do you know <Divine Revelations>?”

“It’s World Dragon Student Council President, right?”

“She seems to have taken a liking to you. I think you will probably meet in the near future, but don’t go against her. She’s fundamentally different from us.”

“Different...?”

As expected, he didn’t really understand.

“For your own good, let me warn you; it’s fine even if you don’t understand now. But, I think it’s best for you not to get involved with <Divine Revelations> and the <Venomous ^{Ereshkigal} Witch> as much as possible. Though they are different from each other, each of them is a different kind of existence from us.”

There was a serious ring in her words.

“Oh, there is another report for you.”

When Helga changed the topic as she said so, she took out her portable terminal and opened a space window.

Projected there was a skinny man with stone-like pupils.

“Black Cat Institute Gold Eye N°7. His name is Werner. We’re pretty sure that it is this man who kidnapped Flora Klemm.”

“! Which means that you have evidence that it is connected to Le Wolfe?”

With one hand, Helga stopped Ayato who half-rose to his feet.

“No, not yet... or rather, we won’t probably find any evidence. Dirk Eberwein is not that naïve a man after all. It will be a different story if we can step into the academy, but it will be impossible to reach that man with the evidence we have now.”

Though Helga’s tone was calm, a slight degree of frustration could be felt in it.

“Dirk Eberwein’s strategy isn’t such a clever thing. The most troublesome point of that man is his stance. He proceeds not in the way where he’ll win, but rather in the way where his enemy will lose. He reaps profit mostly by ensnaring others. That’s precisely why it’s difficult to see through it.”

“Then...”

“What we found were traces that this man —— Werner was attacked by someone. The same blood as the one that was left in the kidnapping site was found in the underground block that he would have probably used for escape.”

“Someone...?”

“Yes. It was probably someone of an Espionage Organization, too. But, we don’t know which academy’s organization it was. If it was a subordinate of Seidoukan, then Werner would be the firm evidence that shows the involvement with Le Wolfe. He couldn’t afford to kill him, and if he were to hold him in custody, it would have been known long ago.”

“What about the possibility of Le Wolfe having failed to silence him?”

But, Helga shook her head.

“It isn’t possible. They, who are called <Cat>, are valuable assets even for the Integrated Enterprise Foundation. Ignoring the fact that he was caught afterwards, there is no need to eliminate him who succeeded in escaping well. In fact, Dirk Eberwein who lost a <Cat> has received blame from the Integrated Enterprise Foundation. He will probably have to lay low for a while —In other words, you may consider that an organization from an academy besides Seidoukan and Le Wolfe is involved in this incident”

“...I see.”

It looked like Flora’s matter was quite deep-rooted.

It did not seem that it could be solved in a very short time.

“We are still investigating this matter. Please, tell that to Riessfeld-kun, too.”

As Helga said that, she slowly stood up.

When he observed her once more, each of her casual gesture, while being natural to the extent that he was surprised, was impeccable.

“...Don’t make eyes that look like those of a student of Asterisk.”

Looking at such Ayato, Helga said as if reminiscing.

“You’ve good eyes with a sincere and strong will. But, owners of such eyes often tend to be easy to deceive. Be careful.”

“Haa...”

“——Well then, if there is some more progress, I’ll come to report it.”

After saying only that, Helga went out of the guidance room leaving Ayato.

“Easy to deceive, huh...”

Ayato muttered that while smiling wryly, and scratched his cheek as he was troubled.

Chapter 2 – Dear People

Floating Airport on the North Kanto Multiplex's Crater Lake.

In a special lounge, Ayato and company were waiting for the boarding time.

“When I was wondering why I wasn't informed of the details no matter how much I urge on, I didn't expect that the royal family's private plane would be sent... Given the situation, it isn't brother's own discretion. Really, I feel uneasy about what will happen in the future.”

Julis, with her hand put on her waist as is, complained to herself

Ahead of her gaze — on the runway on the other side of the glass, was the figure of the scheduled airplane which Ayato and the others would board from here on. A complicated national emblem was drawn on the fuselage flank. According to Julis, it seemed that the red rose on a golden background shield which is the crest of the Riessfeld House, the eagle holding a crown which is the crest of the old royal family the Barzelunia House, and other crests of several royal families interlaced on it became the national emblem of the present Lieseltania.

“Even though there is no airport, there is a royal family private plane?”

“The role of royalty is solely foreign trips. As expected, it'll be troublesome without at least that. Well, we depend on the

neighboring country for the management and maintenance, but... there are a lot of troublesome circumstances in that area. I'll explain it later."

At Ayato's question, Julis answered so with a sigh.

"Fufufu, Lieseltania's circumstances are slightly complicated after all... Now then, we shall get ready soon."

Claudia clapped her hands and looked around at everyone.

Since Lester refused to come in the end, going to Lieseltania were Julis, Ayato, Claudia, Saya and Kirin.

This time when New Year's Eve was around the corner, it was crowded everywhere in the airport; but this special lounge for VIP had been reserved for Ayato and the others. It seemed that this was also arranged by Julis' brother, and seemingly there being an exclusive boarding bridge for boarding, they were grateful that they would proceed without standing out thanks to it.

Since they were going outside of Asterisk, everyone was naturally dressed in casual clothes, and they didn't wear school badges which they were usually obligated to carry. The four girls were dressed differently: Julis was dressed in a silk dress; Claudia wore a mini-skirt, a knit turtleneck and tights; Saya wore denim short pants, a parka, and leggings; and Kirin wore pants (trousers) and a large sweater.

By the way, Ayato has an extremely plain appearance consisting of a collared shirt, jeans and a jacket.

“Oh yes, everyone; please confirm whether the carrying out procedures of luxes are properly completed.”

As Claudia said so, they took out their portable terminals to confirm the application data.

The character of approval was properly written there.

Despite the awareness in Asterisk, an approval was needed for possession of a lux holding essentially power above a certain level. It was also the same when carrying it in and out of the country. That was particularly strict for ogre luxes, so as for Ayato's < Ser-Versta>, though the application passed, it was the most time consuming.

Speaking of this point, Claudia's <Pan-Dora> should also be the same, but it seemed that a free pass of a fixed period was issued to her by the Integrated Enterprise Foundation as a special case.

“Speaking of which, Julis hasn't applied for anything, right?”

“Yes, the new model lux which I'm testing now is a technology which hasn't yet been made public. So I can't readily take it out.”

Julis said so and smiled wryly.

“More importantly, it seems to have been more troublesome for Kirin.”

“Ah, yes... But, it somehow went well.”

It seemed that a procedure different from a lux's was required for Kirin's Senbakiri, and she met fairly unexpected difficulties.

"Well, it isn't Asterisk, so I don't think that there will be many opportunities to use our weapons, but... wait, huh?"

Then, Ayato's portable terminal informed him of a call.

When he took it out wondering who it might be——

"Eh...?"

His hand unintentionally stopped at the unexpected name.

"?"

"Ayato, what's the matter?"

"N-No, it's nothi——"

But, by the momentum from him trying to hide it from Saya who wonderingly tilted her head to the side and looked into his hand, Ayato's finger pressed a button.

"Yoo-hoo, Ayato-kun. Do you have a little time now?"

As soon as the space window opened, projected there was Sylvia with a cheerful smile.

"——!?"

At the same time, surprise and strain ran among everyone.

“Geez, it’s because you didn’t contact me even once even though it was you who asked for my contact address... huh?”

Sylvia, also seeming to have realized on the other side of the space window, lowered her eyebrows slightly awkwardly and said to Ayato.



“Arara... were you by any chance busy?”

“Ah, no... it isn’t really that, but...”

Not knowing how to answer, he gave such an evasive answer for the time being.

Since the communication just came from only a mere acquaintance, there wasn’t particularly anything underhanded. Of course, even if the fact that the other party wasn’t an ordinary person, but the world famous Diva Sylvia Lyyneheym, all the people present here already knew the fact that Ayato became acquainted with Sylvia.

But, about the details of how he and Sylvia became acquainted, Ayato made up several reasons and dodged it. This was because he promised Sylvia not to tell anyone about it.

Thanks to that, he had been persistently questioned by Julis and Saya for a time, but it had finally subsided recently.

And now he received her call at this timing.

“Look here, if it isn’t the <Melodious Witch>^{Sigrdrifa}. It’s been since the <Phoenix>’s closing ceremony, hasn’t it?”

Claudia took a step forward and smiled at Sylvia.

“Yes, that’s right. We didn’t have the chance to chat that much at that place, so I feel like it’s been a longer time, but... You seem to be fine above all, <Master of Thousand Eyes>.”

Parca Morta

“If you had showed up in the Rikka Garden Council for a little while, we could have talked though.”

“Hahaha... it hurts when you tell me that.”

Perhaps because they were old acquaintances, Claudia and Sylvia naturally exchanged words.

Having broken in there was Julis.

“By the way — what kind of business does the Queen Veil Girl’s Academy Student Council President have with our Ayato?”

“Fufufu, don’t make such a scary face, Riessfeld-san.”

Sylvia smoothly eluded Julis’ sharp gaze and returned her gaze to Ayato.

“I don’t have business with Ayato-kun as the Student Council President, but just as the individual Sylvia Lyyneheym.”

“Individual, you say...?”

“Yes. —So, Ayato-kun? I’ll repeat myself, but why didn’t you contact me? It isn’t really like I helped you expecting thanks, but not even contacting me after that slightly hurts, you know?”

Sylvia said to Ayato as she lovingly pouted.

Contrary to her words, her tone seemed to be a teasing one and it did not mean to blame Ayato at all.

“Errr, that’s... I’m sorry. Sylvie seemed busy, so I felt a little hesitant. If I’m not mistaken, you should be currently touring, right?”

While feeling a little relieved, he explained the reason.

It was true that he thought of wanting to thank her somehow or other, but after the end of the <Phoenix>, Ayato was busy with this and that, and at the time that settled down, Sylvia had already departed for the Asian Tour. She should still be in the middle of it even now, so it was really unexpected that she would contact him.

Though they exchanged contact addresses, their direct acquaintance was only that once after all. Moreover, the other party was the diva of the century and the world’s top idol. He understood that the person herself has a candid personality, but even so it would normally be an impossible story.

“Hmm, so you paid attention to it. All right, in that case, I’ll forgive you.”

Sylvia nodded with a smile as she said so.

“Instead, when things will settle down on your side, I’ll contact you this time for sure. It’s true that I want to thank you after all. If I remember correctly, now... you’re in Thailand, right?”

“Yes, Bangkok. My return there (Asterisk) is scheduled in the next month, but at this rate, it looks like it’ll be slightly delayed. At any rate, thank me, huh... Ah, then Ayato-kun. I’ve one request, but could you hear it?”

“A request? Well, if it’s something I can do, then...”

Then, Sylvia teasingly winked.

“Don’t worry, it’s not that much. I mean, there is a school festival next year, right?”

“Yes, I’ve heard that there is such an event in spring. I’ve never participated in it before, so I don’t really know though.”

After all, this year’s school festival was already over when Ayato enrolled.

In common schools, a school festival was probably a big event, but needless to say that in Asterisk, what was given top priority was the <Festa>. Therefore, the school festival seemed to be held in spring when not a single <Festa> was held. Even so, he heard that it was so lively as by no means to lose to the<Festa>.

“Yes, won’t you go on a date with me there?”

“He~e, a date, huh. Yes, I can at least... huh, a date!?”

Since Sylvia said it so indifferently, he reflexively nodded, but he confusedly asked again as he immediately realized it.

“Ah, I’m relieved. I’ll properly disguise myself like last time.”

But, it was a subtly evasive answer which had returned.

“I don’t mean that!”

Seeing Ayato flustered, Sylvia happily shrugged her shoulders as she chuckled, but Julis, Saya and Kirin who raised their eyes broke in there.

“W-Wait a moment! What the hell do you mean by that?!”

“...I can’t ignore that.”

Claudia folded her arms and smiled wryly as she took a step back, but Kirin stared at Ayato with an anxious look.

“Even if you ask me what I mean, I only want to know Ayato-kun better. Of course, if Ayato-kun has a girlfriend, then I retract my request since I’ll feel bad for her. How about it?”

“No, I don’t have a girlfriend, but...”

“What a relief. Then, there’s really no problem, right? I’ll contact you again to give you the details when I’m back.”

As Sylvia slightly waved her hands while saying so, the space window shut down with a snapped sound.

“Ah! Wait, Sylvie!”

Ayato’s voice resounded in vain, and instead several painful gazes ran into his back.

“...Well, for the time being, it’s the boarding time. Let’s go. ——
What, we’ve a lot of time anyway. You’ll tell us the story in detail
in the plane.”

To Julis’ thorny voice, Ayato felt cold sweat run down his back.

- -

“——Sorry. As expected, I can’t break my promise.”

When Ayato decisively said so, Julis greatly sighed.

“Good grief... Well, it’s you we’re talking about. I’d guessed
you might say that.”

“...You really are stubborn, Ayato.”

Saya smiled wryly as she somewhat gave up, too.

“Now, now, that’s also Ayato’s good side after all.”

Claudia said so and clapped her hands. As to mean, ‘with this,
this topic is over’.

When Ayato heaved a sigh of relief, he leaned his back on the
fluffy sofa type seat.

Should he say as expected of the private plane that the royalty used; the room with a luxurious interior design hardly thinkable to be inside a plane was surprisingly comfortable. Naturally at the time of taking off and landing, they must go back to normal seats, but everyone was currently relaxing around a table.

—No, to be exact, there was at least one person which this didn't qualify to.

“By the way... How is your physical condition, Kirin-chan?”

Ayato called out like so to Kirin who sat next to him.

“Y-Yes... Thank you, I’m all right...”

Kirin who answered with a powerless smile didn’t appear to be all right at all contrary to her words. Her face turned pale, and upon close inspection, her feet were slightly trembling.

“I’m sorry to worry you... S-Since I was child, I-I’ve a great fear of planes...”

“You shouldn’t force yourself and return to lie down on your seat.”

Since the normal seats were reclining seats, it would certainly be better if she lay down there.

“N-No, I’m calmer when I’m with everyone.”

To Julis’ words of concern, Kirin feebly shook her head.

When she was wondering why Kirin wasn't somehow feeling good all day long, it appeared to be for such a reason.

——And,

“Kyah!”

The plane suddenly shook, and Kirin fell down on Ayato.

Kirin vigorously hit her face on Ayato's thigh and held her nose with a frown.

“Aww...”

“Are you, all right, Kirin-chan?”

“Y-Yes, somehow... huh, waah!?”

When Kirin opened her eyes wide as she was surprised, she tried to immediately raise her body in a panic state, but she once again fell right away on Ayato's knees as she couldn't muster strength in her arms.

It was the so-called 'lap pillow' situation.

“U-Um, s-sorry...! I'll immediately...”

To Kirin who said so in panic while turning her eyes around, Ayato put his hand on her head with a wry smile.

“It’s fine, Kirin-chan. You’ll be more at ease like this, so you can stay like this until you calm down.”

“Eh!? B-But...!”

“It’s fine, just stay like that.”

When Ayato gently stroked her soft silver hair, Kirin apologetically — and yet somewhat happily too nodded slightly.

“Gunuh...”

“Kuh...”

Saya and Julis were looking at them with eyes seeming to want to say something, but Claudia once again opened her mouth so as to change the atmosphere in the place.

“Now then, there is something I would like to consult everyone here with, but is that all right?”

Though her tone was calm, it somehow had a serious ring.

Everyone noticing it turned their eyes towards her.

“I think that everyone already knows, but... by consultation, I mean to speak about next year’s <Festa>. To everyone present here, I would like you to participate in the <Gryps> as my team members.”

As Claudia took a short pause once there, she turned to Ayato.

“I have invited Ayato before. His answer at that time was——”

“Only if Julis agreed to join.”

Ayato answered before Claudia finished her sentence.

“Does that feeling stay unchanged even now?”

“Yes, it does.”

When Ayato asserted so, Julis nodded while slightly blushing.

“W-Well, I guess it’s not surprising coming from you.”

“Then, Julis. What do you say?”

Claudia directed her attention to Julis.

“Before that, there is also something I want to ask.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“Why are you so fixated on the <Gryps>? With your level of skill, you should be able to win the <Phoenix> or the<Lindvolus>. But, since your appearance to the last <Gryps>, you didn’t show any behavior to participate in the previous <Lindvolus> and <Phoenix>.”

Ayato also thought that. In another perspective, there was also a rumor that it was because she made such a contract with the Integrated Enterprise Foundation, but he could not feel the will to participate in other tournaments from Claudia herself.

“You’re right. Certainly, I would be able to win be it the <Phoenix> or the <Lindvolus>. However —— it’ll probably be difficult to win. In that case, it’s no good.”

“Do you mean to say it’ll be possible if it’s the <Gryps>?”

“Yes, as long as I have reliable comrades though.”

Claudia affirmed with a smile.

“I will tell you more than this only when you all decide to become my teammates. Since it’s related to my and this child’s weakness.”

Saying so, Claudia lightly tapped the holder on her waist.

The activation body of the ogre lux <Pan-Dora> should probably be settled there.

“...The future foresight’s weakness?”

Saya quizzically frowned.

<Pan-Dora> was an ogre lux of a level which there was hardly any people that didn’t know of it due to its overwhelming ability, but when it came to the details of its ability, no one really knew.

Even if you are able to foresee, concretely how far ahead can you foresee? How many times can you use it? Regarding that area, even the well-informed Eishiro seemed to have gotten only info were rumors.

Ayato also heard about the price (of using the ability) from Claudia before, but he was told nothing about the ability.

“Fufufu, there exists no invincible weapon in this world.”

“But, President is fairly strong even without <Pan-Dora>, right?”

Kirin inclined only her head and timidly said.

Her complexion looked slightly better and though only a little, her voice seemed to have regained strength.

“No, no, my power without <Pan-Dora> isn’t worth much. That’s precisely why I need strong comrades. After all, if I intend to win in the <Gryps>, I must defeat those <Silver ^{Life Rhodes} Wings Knights>.”

‘Silver Wings Knights’ did not only point at the St. Garrardsworth Academy’s <Page One>(s), but it was also the name of the strongest team that Garrardsworth, which specialized in group battle, was proud of. Two teams, team N°1 and team N°2 were composed of members from rank #1 to rank #10, and team N°1 achieved victory in the last <Gryps>.

Of course, the members would probably be different from last time, but the rank #1, <Holy Knight>^{Pendragon}, and rank #2, <Witch of Light Wings>^{Gloriara}, who formed its core would remain. They would definitely be the greatest favorite this time, too.

“From World Dragon, Zhao HuFeng and Cecily Won who formed the tag-team that won the <Phoenix> before you’d appear. Moreover in that World Dragon’s team, I hear that the best disciple of <Divine Revelations> will also participate.”

“Ah, you mean the rank #2, <Hagun Star>, huh. I hear that he’s skillful to a fearful degree.”

“Also, Rusalka of Queen Veil can’t also be underestimated... With that said, with only what we know now, there are a lot of strong contestants, and there are powerful enemy teams which will be coming out from now on. Please keep this secret, but the revival of the mercenary system also seemed to be considered to be in the next <Festa>, so we don’t know from where an ambush would appear.”

“Mercenary?”

When Ayato asked again as those were words he had never heard before, Julis sullenly answered.

“It’s a system to let people outside of Asterisk participate in the <Festa>. Naturally, there are various restrictions, but it may be

adopted to preserve the scale of the <Festa>. Especially in the <Gryps>, compared with other <Festa>, the number of participants tends to decrease after all.”

From the viewpoint of maintaining the performance-like climax, a certain participation quota was established for each academy in the <Festa>, but as for this quota, trading between academies was accepted. Specifically, it was as such: World Dragon, where there were many students and the quota was not sufficient, bought from Queen Veil where the quota was in excess and there was little number of students^[2].

But, for the <Gryps>, you had to first gather members and then must have them undergo training so that they can work as a team; in the first place, the hurdle here was higher than the other <Festa>. Hence, there seemed to be cases where the quota was not filled.

“Since the matter of mercenaries is a problem related to the foundation of the <Festa>, it’s carefully handled; but if it’s well organize, since it’ll be able liven up the atmosphere, there will be positive and negative impressions.”

When inquiring further in detail, the mercenaries were temporarily given a membership as students by each academy, and could also participate in the <Festa> only once. Even the points given to them by the attached academy seemed to be much less than the regular students’. Because the age limit was also conformed to that of a regular student, it went up to 22 years old.

“...In short, supplement participants?”

As Saya also did not know about this system, she put on an expression showing that she did not quite understand.

“You shouldn’t take it lightly. Among the past mercenaries, there were a lot of people who experienced actual combat such as the children soldiers of the major Private Military Companies (PMC). In such cases, they were much stronger than the up-and-coming students.”

“If I remember correctly, I heard that quite long ago, mercenaries nearly won the <Festa> and because of that, there have been many complications.”

When Kirin said so, Claudia nodded in agreement.

“Since then, the mercenary system repeated the cycle of disappearing and being revived. Well, if it’s Chairman Madiath Mesa, I think he will properly deal with it...”

“Anyway, it doesn’t change the fact that it’s a troublesome thing. Certainly, it won’t be easy to win the next <Gryps>.”

Julis said so and looked straight at Claudia.

“...Phew, I got it. I’ll participate in your team. I’ve no reason to decline from the beginning.”

“Thank you, Julis. But... it’s also available to the rest of you; it is fine even if you don’t give your answer right now.”

“Even though you’re the one who asking.”

Julis frowned with a “what are you saying” face.

Then, it was unusual for Claudia to reveal some hesitation in her pupils.

“Now —— I just wanted to confirm everyone’s intention. Let me see... Well then, let’s assume the time that this trip ends as the time limit. After all, something might happen and you have a change of heart. At that time, you don’t have to mind it.”

Claudia immediately returned to her usual smile, but her way of talking was somewhat unusual after all.

Julis and company, having probably understood it, looked at each other with somewhat dubious faces.

- -

The damage of the <Ember Tears> was relatively small in the European area, and the metropolises were also developed and preserved as those of the old century. However, since they could not escape from the flow of population concentration, the disparity was notable with mid-sized cities and below.

Transfer by railway from Munich Airport, one hour. Ayato and company arrived at Saya’s house earlier than expected. Even so,

time had already passed into the evening and the sun was gradually setting. So they decided to stay at Saya's house for today

.

Saya's house was a detached two-storied building in the Munich suburbs. Though it seemed to be an old private house of brickwork which had been remodeled, as expected it looked too old to live in as is; so considerable effort was put in there in rebuilding it. Upon close inspection, various kinds of sensors were installed in the premises and the entranceway, and one could understand that it was a fairly strict security.

The temperature in southern Germany was low and although it was really sunny today, there was a lot of snow piled up on the way.

Honestly speaking, it was quite cold.

"...I'm back."

"Oh, so you're finally back, my stupid daughter."

When Saya standing at the front cancelled the sensors and locks and opened the door, welcoming Ayato and company was Saya's mother —— Kaya. She held an electronic cigarette in her mouth and her hair was roughly gathered on the back of her head.

"Kaya-san, long time no see."

"Yes. Long time no see, Ayato. You've become a fine man."

Kaya said so and revealed a carefree smile.

Her slender figure and features looked a lot like Saya's, but she was quite tall, probably almost around Ayato's height. She was so young that it was hard to think that she was Saya's mother.

"Mrs. Sasamiya, we will be under your care today."

Claudia stepped forward and deeply bowed her head.

"Thank you for your politeness. You're Seidoukan Student Council President, right?"

"Yes. My name is Claudia Enfield."

"U-Um, I'm——"

At the moment when Kirin was going to introduce herself after Claudia.

『My, my, you can't stand around talking in the doorway. Anyway, come in.』

"Hiyaah!?"

Suddenly, a semi-transparent figure of a man appeared next to Kaya and Kirin surprised raised a cute scream.

"Hey Soichi-san, they'll be surprised if you suddenly come out like that."

『Oh, sorry, sorry. Since I could see them from the side, I just...』

Being glared at by Kaya, the man scratched his head.

He was around 50. His figure which wore glasses and grew a beard mostly matched that of Saya's father Sasamiya Soichi that was in Ayato's memory.

—If you excluded the fact that it was insubstantial, that is.

“A holograph, huh...”

Julis muttered to herself.

They knew that Soichi lost his body in an accident during research since they heard it from Saya after the end of the < Phoenix >. However, now that it's like this before their eyes now, they did not know what to say.

『Hahaha, don't make such a face, Ayato-kun. I did certainly lose my flesh-and-blood body, but it's not really that much inconvenient. Rather, this way is more suitable for my luxes' production.

“...Yes.”

To Soichi who laughed loudly, Ayato returned a wry smile.

“Well, as Soichi-san said, we can't stand around talking at the entrance. For the time being, come in. It isn't that much, but I also prepared dinner.”

Being guided by Kaya as such, they proceeded to the living room.

The attire of the room which was functional and where there weren't so many things hadn't changed from the past. On the table conspicuously placed in the center, dishes were lined up in a row.

"I usually make only the portion I eat. So, I was happy to have the opportunity to display my ability after such a long time. Here, sit, sit."

When they arrived at the table being urged by Kaya, Julis and Kirin introduced themselves once again.

"My name is Julis-Alexia van Riessfeld. I am very grateful for Saya...san's family to take care of us."

"I never thought that the Princess of the country neighboring to ours would have come over. It's a small house, but please relax."

"U-Um, I'm Toudou Kirin. I was really helped by Saya in the <Phoenix>, too..."

"Hahaha, you don't need to be so humble. Rather, didn't our child cause you any trouble?"

"N-No, hardly...!"

Kirin buzzingly shook her head.

"Honestly, I didn't expect you to make it till the semifinals."

『Fufufu, I believed it though.

“Sochi-san, it’s because you’re just a doting parent, geez.”

While smiling wryly, Kaya moved as to tap Soichi’s shoulder.

Although there was a great difference between their ages, this husband and wife pair was close as usual.

『Well, after all thanks to you, lots of offers flooded (in) from research institutes and enterprises here and there to my place, too. It’s indeed a good feeling. Well, I turned them all down though.

Soichi who said so looked very satisfied.

“Turned them down... why is that?”

『It’s enough for me if the luxes I made are highly evaluated. Of course, money is necessary to live by, but I’m not so poor for the time being.

“If I’m not mistaken, Sasamiya-sensei participated as a development assistant in Galaxy’s research facilities, right?”

『Hou, you’re well-informed, eh.

At these words, Soichi opened his eyes wide in surprise.

Claudia’s parents were big shots of Galaxy, so she might also be well-informed in that area.

“That reminds me, Soichi-ojisan. This House also has a laboratory, right?”

『Yes, it's in the basement. I prepared a facility which can't compare with the one of the house in Japan. My main body is there , and the factory is operating even now as we speak.

“...Dad invested all the compensation payment of the accident in there.”

“Good grief”, Saya shrugged her shoulders as she sighed.

『That's right! In any case, I'll have to adjust Saya's luxes after this. Since it's a rare opportunity, I want to show you how amazing——

“Yes, yes, let's leave it for later. More importantly, let's dig in without delay. I'll go warm the soup.”

Kaya said as to hold back the enthusiastic Soichi, and the lively meal began before long.

Even Kirin who was nervous at first soon relaxed and had fun talking about the <Phoenix> and Flora's rescue.

As for Kaya's meal, a Japanese-style meal was at the center and it had a delicate seasoning which —— though it was rude to say this —— did not match her easy-going character. Plaice^[3] boiled in soy sauce, and rolled eggs, though plain, were both delicious, but for Ayato, it was above all a taste which felt nostalgic.

In Ayato's house, his big sister took over in place of their mother. But still, as expected it was difficult for a student to handle all of the housework every day. And since Haruka also had training to do, all the more so.

Therefore, both Ayato and Haruka also were often under the care of the Sasamiya house which was their neighbors.

For Ayato, it might be said that the image of harmony was rather closer here than in his home.

(It's really nostalgic, eh...)

Ayato savored the taste before he realized it while loosening his cheeks.

- -

"Now then, I'll guide you to the rooms."

A while after they finished dinner, Kaya said so and stood up.

"Just for note, there are two vacant rooms for guests on the second floor and I'm thinking to have you use them, but are you all right with two people for each room?"

"Yes. There is no problem."

Though Claudia answered in everyone's stead, Kaya slightly frowned.

"But you know... how will we assign the rooms? Even if it's already good since Saya will use hers..."

"Assign the rooms?"

While saying that, Ayato suddenly realized.

If two people shared one room and Saya already had her own room, then he would inevitably——

"I see. In that case, I'll use a room together with Ayato."

"Eeeh!?"

"Wha!? Wait a moment, Claudia! W-What are you saying all of a sudden?"

"Ara, is there any problem?"

Julis flustered tried to stop her, but Claudia wonderingly tilted her head to the side.

"Of course, there is a big problem! F-For a man and woman of the same age to sleep in the same room is, um..."

"Fufufu, it's all right. After all, I believe in Ayato. Right, Ayato?"
"

“No, well...”

Ayato revealed a cramped smile as he escaped from her meaningful gaze.

Though it was the usual thing, he didn’t know at all how far Claudia’s utterance was serious.

“Or can’t Julis trust Ayato?”

“Ugh...! T-That’s not right! Of course, I believe in Ayato, but t-this and that are different matters, I mean...”

Julis mumblingly faltered.

“I-I also believe in Ayato-senpai!”

There, Kirin with a deep red face suddenly bent herself forward

“Oh my, in that case shall I leave him to you, Toudou-san?”

“Eh? T-That’s, um...”

Kirin looked downward for a moment, and then looked at Ayato with upturned eyes while bashfully shaking her small body.

“B-But, if A-Ayato-senpai is fine with it, then I...”

“Eh...?”

“I see. It’d certainly be better to have Ayato choose.”

Claudia clapped her hands and Julis also looked with a sidelong glance as she glared at Ayato while blushing.

“Errr...”

This was a situation where it was impossible for Ayato to safely come through no matter how he answered.

He could not help but feel like running away, but he keenly felt a pressure which did not allow even that.

“Ah by the way, I won’t mind even if you are to do something to me. In fact, I’ll welcome it.”

“No, I won’t!”

He reflexively retorted to Claudia who calmly said that.

——Then.

“...Mom, stop teasing us.”

Saya who said so with a sigh turned a blaming gaze towards Kaya.

“Ayato should just simply use my room. Like that, it’s settled.”

“...Ah”

At her words, the air, which froze for an instant, flowed to the place again.

It was quite plausible now that she said it.

Considering that there were three rooms, it wasn't necessary at all for Ayato to share a room with a girl in the first place.

“Hahahaha! Sorry, sorry, I couldn't help myself.”

“Fufufu, then let's do that. It's a little regrettable though.”

Kaya burst into laughter as she could no longer bear it and Claudia as well smiled while shrugging her shoulders. Since there was no way that she would not notice such a simple thing, she was probably teasing them from the beginning.

“.....”

On the other hand, Julis and Kirin turned their faces away somewhat embarrassed.

- -

Saya's room almost didn't change since when they were children and there was almost nothing put in there. Beside a bed, a desk and a portable terminal, there was hardly anything which stood out.

Naturally since she currently lived in the dormitory, it was a fact that she carried a part of her luggage; but he guessed that her

room in the dormitory was probably not so different from her room here. If it was not in this room, but in the room of the dormitory, there would probably be at least a case where she stored her luxes.

Since when she was child, aside from fiddling with a lux, Saya did not have a hobby which could be called so (hobby). Though it was probably also because of her father's influence, it should not be only that.

While being illuminated by the moonlight coming in through the window, Ayato who lay down on the bed was vaguely thinking about such things.

It was now late at night.

In the other rooms, the others were probably already asleep.

However, for some reason Ayato could not fall asleep, and was immersed in endless thought.

(I wonder if it's because I met dear people after a long time...)

Not sleeping as such might impede him tomorrow; but it was not a bad feeling.

—And.

“...Ngh”

The room's door suddenly opened and someone walking unsteadily came in the room.

“!”

Ayato was about to get up promptly, but he immediately lowered his guard as he realized who it was.

“What, it’s Saya, huh. What is it at such a time?”

Although he did not notice for an instant as it was dusky, it was certainly Saya.

However, without even answering to Ayato’s call, she slowly walked towards him with unsteady steps.

“Saya...?”

“Ngh...”

It looked like she was half asleep.

Saya who came while drowsily dozing off with half-closed eyes collapsed in the bed with a *thud* sound. Ayato hurriedly stopped Saya who was about to crawl into the futon.

“W-Wait a moment, Saya! It’s bad!”

Upon close inspection, Saya had pulled down her pajamas, and it was a quite suggestive appearance as her shoulders as well as her stomach were exposed

While being troubled at where to look, Ayato shook her body trying to wake her up, but Saya showed no signs of waking up at all.

“Haa... Saya’s bad habit of walking while sleeping hasn’t changed, huh...”

Having said that, since he couldn’t leave her just as is, he had no choice but to use his last resort.

“I hope it’ll still work though.”

As he slightly pinched her nose, the face of Saya who soundly raised a peaceful sleeper’s breathing changed completely. She knitted her brows and reluctantly shook her head, but Ayato did not let go.

When they were children, this was the best way to wake Saya, but it seemed to be still effective now, too.

“...PUHA!”

Saya whose face turned red before long vigorously got up.

“You finally woke up, huh...”

“? ...Hmm?”

Saya restlessly looked around as a question mark appeared over her head.

But, after staring at Ayato's face for a full ten seconds when she noticed him next to her——

“Ayato...? Why are you... ah! Don't tell me you crawled into my bed at night?”



"AYATO...? WHY ARE YOU... AH! DON'T TELL ME
YOU SNEAK IN MY BED AT NIGHT?"

She unnaturally hugged the futon with a somewhat happy face for some reason.

“No! It’s you who came in on your own accord!”

“Huh? But, this is my room...”

“This is certainly your room, but it was decided that I’ll be using it today!”

“...Oh.”

As she finally understood, she tapped her hand with a *pon* sound.

“...It looks like I woke up to go to the toilet and on the way back, I ended up coming here.”

“Well, I’ve already figured out that it was something like that.”

When Ayato said that with a wry smile, Saya bowed her head.

“...Sorry, Ayato. Did I wake you?”

“No, I couldn’t fall asleep anyway. Somehow, I was remembering various things of the past.”

“Past...?”

Then, Saya hung her head down with a somewhat pondering face.

“...Saya?”

“——Ayato. Can we talk for just a little bit?”

“Ah, yes. I don’t mind, but... What is it so suddenly?”

When Saya turned around to Ayato, she opened her mouth after she hesitated for an instant.

“I wanted to apologize to Ayato since a long time ago...”

“Apologize...? About what?”

Since he had no idea at all about what it was, he frankly asked back.

“...After I moved, you and I kept in contact. Do you remember?”

“Of course.”

Even after Saya moved, Ayato normally contacted her with a portable terminal. No matter how far away you lived from each other, there were as many ways as you wanted to keep in contact in the modern era. There was the problem of time difference and it could not be frequent, either; but even so they had initially decided to contact each other about once every three days.

However before they knew, it gradually turned into once a week, then once a month when half a year passed, until such exchanges naturally stopped at last.

There was a time of loneliness, and although she was child, she remembered that she thought that it was probably inevitable.

“...It became painful to continue like that, so I decided to cut contact.”

“Eh? Was it like that?”

He did not remember it that way, but now that she mentioned it, the number of times that he got contacted by Saya was few.

“After all...we were playing together every day before, and yet we could only talk after I moved. And for just a short time at that. At first, it was pleasant even like that, but it became immediately painful for me. That’s why I thought... until the day we’ll be able to meet again properly.”

As she remembered those days, Saya muttered with a despondent face.

“But, I don’t really mind that...”

“——It isn’t only that.”

Saya shook her head and continued with a sad expression.

“If we had kept in contact all along, I might have been your strength when Haru-nee disappeared.”

“——”

To these unexpected words, Ayato gasped for an instant.

“Even if I couldn’t be your strength, I could have at least cheered you up. I could have also supported you. That’s why... It’s very frustrating for me.”

“Saya...”

“I should have done so. After all...I’ve been beside Ayato for a very long time.”

In fact, if Saya was there in those days, Ayato also thought that it would’ve been quite helpful. But, it was no use even if he said it at this late hour.

“Therefore, Ayato. I want you to rely on me when it’s necessary. This time for sure, I’ll be your strength.”

When Saya raised her head, she held Ayato’s arm and said that.

Her eyes were serious, straightforward and not cloudy.

(Be my strength, huh...)

Strangely, these were the same words that Ayato had said to Julis before.

“Thank you, Saya. Then, I’ll count on you when the time comes.”

“Yea.”

As he said so, Saya finally revealed a smile and nodded.

“Now then, if we don’t really sleep now, tomorrow——”

The moment when Ayato spoke up to there, a high-pitched sound suddenly echoed.

“W-What is that?”

“...Our alarm system.”

He remembered now that she said that, but security was awfully tight (strict) in Saya’s house from a long time ago. According to Soichi, it seemed to be a measure “to defend against people who try to snatch his research”, but Ayato was also caught by it when he was child and he had suffered a painful experience.

“Then, don’t tell me it’s a thief?”

When he went out of the room for the time being, the others similarly came out of their rooms, too.

“What the heck is this noise...?”

While holding back her yawn, Julis grumbled.

Kirin also looked half asleep while briskly rubbing around her eyes.

“Is it some sort of emergency state?”

As usual, only Claudia was calm, but on the other hand more than Saya, she had an even more adult figure that made one unsure on where to look. Ayato averted his eyes since, although

she put on thin pieces over her shoulder, her negligee figure was uselessly transparent here and there.

『Oh, sorry, sorry. Looks like I've surprised you.

There, Soichi's holograph appeared and the alarm stopped exactly at the same time, too.

“...What happened?”

『There seems to have been fellows who invaded the back yard, but it looks like they immediately ran away.

“Intruders, you say?”

『Yea. I'm analyzing the traces they left now. I think perhaps there're subordinates from either an enterprise somewhere or a research institute, but...

At Soichi's words, Claudia pondered with a serious expression.

『Well, my house's security system doesn't lose even to that of a research institute directly under the Integrated Enterprise Foundation's control. So you may feel at ease and rest.

When he said so, the holograph disappeared as it melted.

“.....”

“Claudia?”

“——Ah, sorry. I was thinking a little about something.”

Claudia chuckled as if there was nothing.

“Then, it’s fine...”

Since it was rare for Claudia to make such a serious expression, he could not say that he was not bothered; but if the person herself said so, then it couldn’t be helped.

“By the way, Ayato. I have one question.”

“Hmm?”

The voice of Julis who said so was somewhat extremely tense.

“Earlier, I saw you and Saya come out of the same room. Why is that?”

“...Ah”

——In the end after that, it took time to solve the misunderstanding and before they noticed, the eastern sky has brightened white.

Chapter 3 – Lieseltania

“Well then, be careful on the way.”

The next morning, Kaya who saw them off to the front door said so with a kind expression while stroking Saya’s head.

“...Yes.”

Saya nodded while being a little embarrassed.

Although today was sunny as well, the temperature was so low that the breaths spat out were white.

『Ah, that’s right. I’ll tell you just in case. It’s about the intruder last night; according to the sensors’ data, it didn’t seem to be a human.

“It wasn’t a human, you say...? Then, what the heck was it?”

When Ayato asked back, Soichi —— or rather his holograph standing beside Kaya briskly rubbed its chin.

There were probably 3-D projection devices not only in the house, but also in many places in the premises.

『It was a wild animal or something like that. It might have come out of a forest that’s around here.

Since this area was a suburb, there seemed to be many dense forests if you went a little further for a walk.

“An animal, huh...”

Claudia pondered over Soichi’s words.

Then, a big black-painted limousine stopped in front of Ayato and company.

“Everyone, I have come to pick you!”

When the girl dressed in maid clothes who came out of the passenger seat — Flora said that vigorously, she exaggeratedly bowed before everyone.

“You’re healthy as usual, huh, Flora-chan.”

“Yes! It’s Flora’s redeeming feature after all!”^[4]

Flora said so with a smile all over her face.

Only several months had passed since the <Phoenix>, but she seemed to have grown a little taller. She would surely become a beautiful girl in several years.

“Well then, Soichi-ojisan, Kaya-san. Thank you for having taken care of us.”

After greeting Kaya and Soichi, everyone got into the car.

The inside of the car was slightly similar to that of Dirk Eberwein’s when Ayato talked with him before; but the windows were not black-tinted, nor was there a table. The driver’s seat side

was separated by a glass slide; interview seats with cushions for three people and comfortable rear seats for two were disposed so as to face each other.

“Ah, Princess and Amagiri-sama, please sit on the rear seats.”

“Eh? Well, it’s fine...”

Ayato did not know what kind of meaning the assignment of seats had, but there wasn’t really any reason to refuse. Just as he was asked, he sat on the rear seat alongside Julis.



“Then, let’s depart!”

When Flora said so, the driver with a stern face silently started the car.

“About how long will it take to arrive there?”

“Let me see... I would say around two to three hours by car from here.”

“Huh, it’s closer than I expected.”

“Lieseltania is a mountainous country located on the border of Germany and Austria after all.”

While answering Kirin’s question, Julis turned her gaze to the three before her.

“Well, there is time, so I’ll briefly speak about my country. Though if I make a mistake, there is one person who might know more than I——”

“Fufufu, I wonder who you might be talking about.”

“...Haa”

As Julis openly sighed, she looked outside the window so as to pull herself together.

“First of all... Let’s see. Originally, the predecessor of the country called Lieseltania was the St Roman Empire. It became

independent as a kingdom at the time of the empire's collapse... and was later overturned by the Germany's revolution. And it lasted for around 100 years as an independent country."

From the start, perhaps because Saya's house was in a suburb, the scenery outside the window immediately changed to series of trees covered with snow. While looking at that, Julis slowly continued.

"There might've been no trouble if it had just ended with that, but sadly Lieseltania has once again been dragged out from within its coffin due to the <Ember Tears>. This is because in the middle of the Revival Period, a special class of Vertice Meteorite was discovered from the territory that used to be Lieseltania."

The Vertice Meteorite was the name used in order to distinguish the meteorites brought about by the <Ember Tears> from normal meteorites.

"If I remember correctly, special class means that it's very rare, right?"

"Just for note, only several tens of meteorites of that kind have been discovered so far."

Having answered Ayato's question was Claudia.

The Vertice Meteorites were graded by its mana dite content rate, and a special class was composed of 95%—— in other words almost entirely of mana dite.

Currently, the technology to create mana dite artificially was established, but as expected most of them hardly reached the real thing in quality. Moreover, because there wasn't that technology in the past yet, the securing of Vertice Meteorites was the top priority matter of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation in the Revival Period.

"The size was quite small compared to other meteorites, but even so in Europe, there was as little Vertice meteorites as there was damage from the <Ember Tears>. When it comes to special class meteorites there, it's natural that the Integrated Enterprise Foundation of any place will want it. After all, Europe is the home territory of powerful figures of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation such as Solneige, Frauenlob, and EP."

Julis took a breather there and once again looked at the three people before her.

"But, the place where they were discovered became a problem. As I said a little while ago, the neighborhood that once used to be Lieseltania became a borderline in that time. On one hand, the influence of Solneige which has established its headquarters in Germany was strong, and on the other hand so is that of Frauenlob based in Austria as well. Therefore, naturally both parties had come to clash... But, the risk of military conflict in Europe which had its quickly stabilized economics' revival due to the economics bloc was too great, so the other Integrated Enterprise Foundations had decided to act as mediation."

“Even though it was called mediation, it feels more like the other Integrated Enterprise Foundations had their eyes on the leftovers interests (rights).”

Claudia plainly spewed venom^[5] with a smile.

“And as soon as the benefit-sharing agreement was concluded, the Integrated Enterprise Foundation came up with the idea of ‘since you’ll split the benefits anyway, why not rather make there a miniature garden where you can do whatever you please more freely’. Although power to oppose the existing nations no longer remains, it doesn't mean that everything is free so long as the Integrated Enterprise Foundation is using that framework. So, what was selected was the country of Lieseltania which once existed there. Therefore in my country, all policies, from tax rate to social status guarantee, are perfectly convenient for the Integrated Enterprise Foundation. Simply put, it's the tax avoidance and the diplomatic immunity of key staffs.”

“...In other words, a puppet nation?”

“Bluntly put, I guess you can say that.”

Julis smiled wryly and shrugged her shoulders to Saya's words.

“This being the case, the research institutes of every Integrated Enterprise Foundation jostled around the Vertice Meteorites. As I also said before, there are no airports in Lieseltania, but if I say that the research institutes respectively have their own runway and maintenance facilities, it's somewhat easy to understand, right?”

“Since mana concentration is high around Vertice Meteorites, it’s ideal for Meteoric Engineering research.”

Mana concentration fluctuated to some extent depending on the place, but there were also data that the higher mana concentration an area has, the easier a <Starpulse Generation> was to be born there.

“That said, it isn’t as if the country itself is poor. We also receive some benefits from the Integrated Enterprise Foundation. Although as the story always goes, the qualitative difference is great.”

Julis who said so bit her lips somewhat in vexation.

From what they heard from Julis’ story, the country called Lieseltania certainly seemed to have complicated circumstances.

While listening to her story, the scenery outside the window was gradually changing into magnificent snowy mountains. There was also a large quantity of fallen snow if compared with the plains. If there was this much snow piling in this season, it meant that there would be much more at the time when it would become fairly cold.

“Ah, we can almost see the Capital Strel!”

Flora sitting on the passenger seat looked back and innocently said.

They seemed to have crossed the border before they knew it.

“Ooh!”

As they looked frontward at Flora’s words, a town bigger than they imagined spread around a lake surrounded by mountains. Old houses made of brick and wood stood in a row, and it generally had the impression of a European townscape that they imagined. In the place seeming to be the center of the town, there were also several buildings standing in a row, and a roadbed crossed the town from there.

“So this is the capital of Lieseltania, Strel... It’s a beautiful town.”

Kirin muttered with a fascinated face.

“Well, it isn’t really that different from other towns though... hmm?”

Then, Julis suddenly frowned. “No, if we’re to go to the royal palace, then we shouldn’t take this road... What is going on, Flora?”

“Errr, this has also been ordered by His Majesty.”

“From big brother?”

“Yes. Please wait a moment.”

Flora took out a folded memo from her pocket like usual and carefully unfolded it.

The car which Ayato and company boarded seemed to have taken the main street heading to the center of the town. Moreover, its speed has clearly decreased.

“...Somehow, doesn’t it look like there are a lot of people?”

Saya said as she stuck her forehead on the window.

“Errr, he said “since you have come back after a long time, enjoy a triumphant return parade while you are at it”.”

“Wha...!?”

Julis was about to get up, but great cheers arose as to stop her.

“Uwah!”

“I-It’s amazing...”

They thought that they got used to cheers in the <Phoenix>, but this was a heated atmosphere which did not lose to that of the finals.

“Princess—!”

“Julis-sama—!”

People were overflowing on the roadsides and everybody unanimously shouted Julis’ name.

Colorful confetti danced down from the sky and when looking up, people showing their faces from windows of houses and buildings were scattering them while waving their hands.

It was a number of people so as to ask oneself whether the men and women of all ages of this town, all without exception, were packing the streets.

When looking carefully, this triumphal return was announced on the posters pasted here and there in the town and in the space windows on the streets along with Julis' photos.

“Kuh, big brother! I'll remember this...!”

Julis turned to the window with a forced smile while cursing her brother as such.

“Julis is really popular.”

“As expected, Princesses are amazing, huh.”

Overwhelmed by such atmosphere, Saya and Ayato frankly expressed their admiration.

“Fufufu, it's to be expected. In Asterisk's history, it's a first for a Princess of a country to win the <Phoenix> after all. I don't need to mention that topicality, right? Both Ayato and Julis have left the dealing with the mass media to the academy and Asterisk and outside tend to be out of touch, but Julis is now a worldwide celebrity rivaling Sylvia Lyyneheym.”

Claudia explained while joyfully chuckling.

“Yes! The number of tourists seemed to have increased thanks to Princess having won the <Phoenix>!”

“Heeh... It’s really amazing.”

If so, then this huge audience was not only the citizens; such people (tourists) were probably mixed in as well.

“You’re speaking like it’s other people’s affairs, but even if it isn’t to the extent of Julis’, Ayato’s home also seems to be very crowded.”

“Eh? What do you mean?”

“It’s just as you’ve heard yesterday, too. Offers flooded to the father of Sasamiya-san who lost in the semifinals, you know? So, it’s natural that the dojo of the Amagiri Bright Dragon Style which won the <Phoenix> will attract attention, right?”

“No way...”

When he contacted his father, he did not mention that at all.

“Well, we of the academy will give back up in that area, so rest at ease.”

“.....”

Because from the start Ayato’s father wasn’t the kind to reject students who came to him or chase after those who left, there wasn’t

't much enthusiasm although he was gathering pupils. That became more and more conspicuous since his big sister's disappearance.

(Guess I'll contact him again later...)

If this was to cause trouble for him, Ayato should apologize briefly.

"——Amagiri-sama, ——Amagiri-sama!"

"Eh?"

His name was shouted as he was pondering; when he suddenly looked up, Flora was staring at him and she seemed irritated.

"If it is fine, please respond too, Amagiri-sama. Like Princess."

"Ah, yes... wait, m-me, too?"

"Yes!"

Flora unconcernedly nodded.

"No, why me, too...?"

"Because Amagiri-sama is Princess' tag partner!"

"Well that's true, but..."

As the troubled Ayato threw a fleeting glance at Julis who was next to him, Julis was waving her hand outside the window with a rare—— though a bit stiff—— smile.

As if responding to it, cheers increased in intensity.

“Fufufu, don’t make such a surprised face. You do know about Julis’ strong sense of responsibility, right?”

Claudia smiled as such at Ayato.

“...Sense of responsibility, huh.”

Certainly, Julis had a responsibility as the Princess of Lieseltania

And there was no doubt that Ayato also had a responsibility as her tag partner.

“Haa, I got it.”

Ayato also reluctantly tried to wave his hand outside the window like Julis. Honestly, there was no more embarrassing, or rather itchy thing than this.

Probably, he had put on a much more stiff expression than Julis.

In fact, among the gathered audience, those calling not only Julis’ name, but Ayato’s were not small in number; which made him become more and more embarrassed.

“But, it’s really an amazing atmosphere.”

“...I’m a little surprised.”

On the other hand, Saya and Kirin sitting in front of them had somewhat carefree expressions.

“As Julis explained a short while ago, this country has quite complicated circumstances. Although this is not a good way of putting it, it is good to let out some stress, I guess.”

When Claudia said so, she continued muttering while dropping her tone.

“Although—— I think the expectation of that person who set up this will not stop at just this.”

- -

The royal palace of Strel was on the opposite shore across the land from the center of the town and it seemed to be currently used as the official residence. It was a solid building made of brick said to have been built more than 200 years ago.

After having finished the parade which lasted longer than expected, Ayato and company finally arrived at this royal palace; but as soon as they arrived, Julis whose face was dyed in anger briskly walked along the corridor with quick steps.

Ayato and the others who were perplexed had no choice but to follow along.

Before long, Julis vigorously pushed open the door of a room located on the second floor of the royal palace without knocking.

“Big Brother! What on earth is the meaning of this?!”

As Julis raised her voice filled with anger, Ayato and company who were behind her quietly peeked into the room.

Although luxurious, it was a room which gave off too gaudy of an impression. Furnishings were probably all first-class items, but they had excessive decoration; be it the desk set up massively by the window side, the big sofa which depicted a gentle curve, or even the paintings and pictures frames displayed on the wall, neither of them seem to fit in well.

And the man who lay down on that sofa with his head put on the lap of a woman with fluffy and curly hair slowly got up.

“Ah, you’ve returned, Julis. Welcome home.”

He was probably in his mid-twenties. His deep red hair was slightly long and he was overall thin. Lightly dressed in trainers, this man did not seem to fit into this room the most.

“Oh my Julis-chan, it’s been a long time. Claudia-chan as well.”

The woman who was doing the lap pillow gently smiled with a carefree tone.

“Big Sister^[6], I’m sorry to intrude in the middle of your relaxation. I would like to talk with Big Brother a little.”

“Yes~”

As the woman innocently said so, she stood up with the man and gracefully bowed.

“Nice to meet you all~”

“You’re the students of Seidoukan Academy, right? I’m glad that you’ve accepted my impolite invitation this time. I’m Jolbert, Julis’ big brother. I’m this country’s King. And this is my wife Maria. Ah, this is my private room, so you may relax, too.”

To these words, the three people except Julis and Claudia opened their eyes wide.

“...Eh?”

Since Julis called him Big Brother, he was certainly so, but still—

“...His Majesty the King?”

Saya stared at Jolbert with dubious eyes.

“...I mean, really?”

“Hahaha, it’s really troubling. Would it be all right if I wear a crown and a flashy mantle?”

Though Jolbert unconcernedly laughed, actually Ayato was surprised, too.

Speaking of Kings generally, one would imagine a little more substantial person, but Jolbert was the exact opposite of that, or rather he gave a frivolous impression overall. Although his features and hair color were similar to Julis', their personality seemed to be completely opposite.

"Normally, I properly wear a suit during public duties. But I'm off duty today. Although there usually isn't any work for me."

"More importantly, Big Brother! I wasn't informed of a triumphant return parade! I thought I told you not to make it that big of a matter!"

"Well, if I've said it, you'd have definitely been against it, right?"

Jolbert indifferently warded off Julis' anger.

"Of course! Moreover, me aside, what are you planning by involving even Ayato?!"

"Yes, well, I just thought since it's a rare opportunity."

"Thinking with common sense, it'll be normal to first talk it through!"

"I got it, I got it. It was my bad. Sorry, everyone."

When Jolbert said so, he turned to Ayato and company and smiled wryly.

“But you know, Julis. The citizens were interested not only in you, but also in your tag partner Amagiri-kun. After all, he’s the partner that you, the princess, have chosen.”

“Ugh...”

Clever indeed. Since Julis was conscious of her position, she would not come forth quite strongly if he mentioned that point.

That’s her brother for you; he knew well Julis’ weak point.

“...Ara, is it only the citizens who are interested in him?”

Claudia looked at Jolbert with eyes hinting at something.

“Oh dear, as shrewd as usual, huh. Young Lady of the Enfield.”

“...What do you mean?”

Though Julis suspiciously asked, Jolbert laughed as to evade it.

“About that, could I have a little of your time again later? I would like to talk about various other things with Julis and Amagiri-kun.”

“Well, I don’t mind, but...”

Since Julis stole a glance at him, Ayato hurriedly nodded, too.

“Ah, yes. Of course.”

Though he had an idea about what the King wanted to talk with him about, he could not afford to refuse, too.

“Oh yeah, I also have to thank you guys for having saved my maid.”

When Jolbert said so, he slowly looked at Ayato and company.

“Therefore, I decided to hold an evening party to welcome you tonight, so by all means I would like you to take part in it. Ah, I have already prepared clothes for you, so you may choose a suitable one. If it’s now, we can still make it for the size adjustment.”

“Like I said, I haven’t heard of that too, Big Brother!”

“Hahahaha. Well isn’t it fine?”

Julis once again raised her voice, but Jolbert’s cool expression did not change.

“Somehow, um, he’s a peculiar one.”

Kirin looked at Ayato with a face showing that she didn’t know what to do, but it was feeling like her words were quite indirect.

“Hahaha...”

Ayato could only return a bitter smile. At least, there was no doubt that he was quite forcible and smooth-talking.

Afterwards, Ayato and company were guided to the royal villa which was in the same site as the royal palace.

It was within walking distance from the royal palace and seemed to be connected by a special corridor.

On the way, a beautiful baroque style garden spread out in front of them, and they could not help but slow down before its splendor. Unfortunately, it was covered by snow now; but the pure white coat of snow without any footprints was also beautiful.

“Wow, it’s really beautiful...”

“Yes! When spring comes, it’s full of flowers and even more beautiful! This is also Princess’ favorite place; and it’s the Princess who personally takes care of these flowers!”

To Kirin who leaked a voice of admiration, Flora puffed her chest with an “ehem”.

Certainly when that season came, there was no doubt that a beauty different from this peacefulness would color this garden.

“Flora, don’t speak of unnecessary things. Let’s quickly go.”

As she was embarrassed, Julis curtly said so and quickened her pace.

While smiling wryly to such a Julis, the party went to the royal villa visible ahead.

Similarly to the garden, the baroque style villa was of a splendor as not to lose to the royal palace; it seemed that one part of it was used for the royalty's residence and all rooms except that were used as a guesthouse where guests of honor would lodge. According to Julis' story, there also seemed to be a quarter for royalty in the royal palace, but Jolbert mainly used the private room of the royal palace and Julis, mainly the private room of this villa or something like that.

As expected unlike in Saya's house, one room —— and a too wide and luxurious one at that —— was given to one person.

Honestly, Ayato could not calm down that much, but even so he could finally take a rest. When he thought so, Flora came before long.

“Amagiri-sama, I brought the formal clothes for the evening party.”

“Ah, the formal clothes which Jolbert-san mentioned earlier, right?”

“Yes. I will examine the size, so could you wear them a little?”

“Ah, yes. More importantly, how is the evening party? Such a place is a first for me...”

Or rather, having an ordinary student participating in an evening party hosted by a King was not that common an

occurrence. Thanks to his big sister having been strict, he acquired the bare minimum etiquette, but still he felt like the dimension was quite different.

“Hmm... Flora really doesn’t know, too, but this evening party is something which was suddenly decided, so I don’t think that it will be such a big thing.”

“I hope so.”

Though not as much as Julis, Ayato too didn’t like things being done so exaggeratedly.

While also being here like this, Flora was writing a lot of things in her memo as usual while measuring the size with familiar hands

“Still Flora-chan, you also have it hard, huh. You’ve to handle various works like this.”

“That’s not true! It’s thanks to His Majesty’s power that Flora is able to work here, so I have to do my best to repay him!”

“Heeh...”

“Besides, handling the men’s preparations is easier, too. Compared with my Senpais who are helping with the preparations of the other...”

“Yes, certainly the preparations in the women side seem to be difficult in a lot of ways.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Since under normal circumstances, women take time to get dressed, when it comes to formal clothes, they would probably take much more time than usual.

——Actually, since the women’s preparations were set, it was after the evening came that Ayato was called.

“...Julis, I’m coming in.”

“Y-Yes. It’s fine.”

When he knocked the door of the room where Flora guided him to, a somewhat nervous voice from Julis returned after a short pause.

While inwardly looking puzzled at her voice, Ayato who opened the door unintentionally stiffened.

According to Flora, this room seemed to be Julis’ private room; she said it was cramped like a room in the dormitory, that plants were put in and that it looked like a small botanical garden.

But, that was not the reason why Ayato became stiff.

It was because he was fascinated by the four girls who were in there—— by their appearances.

“W-Why are you standing around so vacantly?”

“That’s right, Ayato. At such time, it’s courtesy to properly praise a lady.”

“...I agree.”

“No, um, I-I’m sure it doesn’t suit me that much, so you don’t have to force yourself...”

Julis and company were respectively dressed in different, yet really suitable dresses.

Everyone was basically dressed in a one-piece dress whose hems were long enough to hide their feet; their arms and back were greatly exposed, and especially since at the bare top, Claudia’s and Kirin’s bosoms were emphasized, Ayato was troubled with where to look. It was probably the so-called evening dress.

Julis was dressed in a deep crimson one-shoulder and Saya wore a white camisole style. Claudia wore an elegant purple and Kirin a thick black.

“...Ah, e-errr, sorry. I think they really suit you all.”

Ayato who suddenly came to his senses frankly said so as he was embarrassed.

Not that it suited someone the most, but that it really suited all of them.



CLAUDIA ENFIELD
SAYA SASAMIYA
KIRIN TOUDOU

三美姫の饗宴

“Fufufu, thank you Ayato. Your outfit suits you really well, too.”

As a dress suit, Ayato was wearing a tuxedo. His hair was also swept back to match it.

Frankly speaking, he did not like stiff (formal) outfits, but it could not be helped.

“Now then, I originally wanted to escort Ayato, but today’s main guests are Julis and Ayato. So, I will bear it. In return, please take care of us properly afterwards, too, okay?”

Claudia said so and pushed Julis’ back.

“W-Well, it can’t be helped... let’s go.”

Julis suddenly held out her hand.

For a moment, Ayato did not understand what it meant, but Julis smiled wryly, lightly bent Ayato’s elbow and put her arm there.

“S-Sorry...!”

“I at least know that you aren’t accustomed to such things. Don’t mind it. I’ll lead you when necessary.”

While chuckling, Julis whispered.

It was slightly shameful for a man, but there was no doubt that Julis was reliable.

“——Everyone, it’s already time. Are you ready?”

Flora broke in there, her tongue seeming to be stuck, but she mustered her courage and told so exaggeratedly.

- -

“Phew...”

Ayato hurriedly restrained the sigh which he unintentionally leaked.

“Fufufu, you seem quite tired.”

Julis standing next to him held out a new drink while laughing.

“Of course. I didn’t think that they’ll be so many people...”

From what Flora said, it wasn’t supposed to be that big a party, but looking at the actual situation, an amazing number of people had gathered in the hall of the royal villa. The invitees were all either people related to the Integrated Enterprise Foundation or Liseltania’s political figures.

Julis and Ayato who were introduced as they were the main guests repeated greetings to various people one after another, and Ayato was already completely exhausted.

“It may not be the time to ask this, but... Julis, didn’t you say that your house has no money?”

Aside of the invitees in the hall illuminated by a gorgeous chandelier, there were several waiters and maids, and drinks and light meals were diligently prepared. Ayato could not even imagine how much amount of money it took to hold such evening party.

“I told you before, right? That in this country, “even if there is money used on me, there is no money I can use”. Besides... my big brother is different from me.”

“Different?”

When Ayato asked, Julis’ eyes naturally chased her brother —— Jolbert’s figure.

Even now, Jolbert was at the center of the party pleasantly chatting with several people. As expected unlike daytime, he was formally dressed and looked like a different person at first glance.

“My brother is obedient to the Integrated Enterprise Foundation after all. He has no claim politically, nor is he enthusiastic in his work. You may say that there is no greatest puppet than him.

Therefore, the Integrated Enterprise Foundation also finds my brother useful as such and overlooks his selfishness to some extent . And my brother too fully enjoys it to the maximum.”

Assuming that these comments were turned to her blood-related brother, it was an acrimonious evaluation, but contrary to her words, Julis’ eyes looked somewhat sad.

“Although, I don’t think that having invited us this time was my brother’s own discretion. There is no doubt that my brother intended to do so as well, but it’s likely that either an Integrated Enterprise Foundation somewhere allowed it or there is also the possibility that they backed it.”

“It’s indeed complicated... wait, huh?”

Ayato who was looking at Jolbert like Julis noticed something strange. Jolbert was always surrounded by multiple women. Queen Maria was among them, but all the other women were touching Jolbert as if they seemed to be intimate.

“...Ah, that, huh. They are all my brother’s mistresses.”

“Eeeh!?”

As Julis plainly said that, Ayato almost dropped the glass in his hand.

“Mistresses... So openly?”

No matter how light the moral value became compared with the past, religiously most of the countries in Europe adopted the

monogamy system. As the inequality between classes was spreading wider, while it is true that the approval concerning the wealthy having multiple women — or rather, the trend to turn a blind eye towards it was certain, even so, beside countries allowing polygamy, it should have been something guilty.

What was strange above all was that those mistresses and Maria who should be the legal wife were joyfully laughing together.

“They are women sent by the Integrated Enterprise Foundation after all. None of them will complain. Besides, speaking in details, it’s the same even for my sister-in-law. I won’t go as far as to say that there are spies among them, but more than half of them are not more than just a relationship of self-interest. When necessary, they probably want to place their pieces near the country’s ruler.”

Julis gulped down her drink as she was fed up with it.

“Maria-san, too...?”

“Well, my sister-in-law being a genuine natural airhead, it’s fortunate that the person herself is unrelated to such expectations. My brother too seemed to have thoroughly investigated her circumstances. I also don’t dislike her... After all, even the citizens know about the mistresses. My brother is qualified as “a debauchee and mediocre, yet amiable and loved King”.”

The eyes of Julis who said so looked like they were enduring something.

“T-That’s Claudia...?”

Having newly accosted Jolbert was Claudia.

Ayato did not know what they were talking about, but by the fact that she could so calmly talk with the King in that really gleeful atmosphere, he guessed that she was used to such a place.

“Did you know that Claudia’s mother is an executive of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation?”

“Yes, I’ve heard about it a little before...”

“Claudia’s mother has been in charge of this region before. It’s also her who introduced my sister-in-law to my brother. Afterwards, she was promoted to an executive and her father took charge over the region. It’s also under attendance of her father that Claudia has been coming to Lieseltania. We hardly interacted at the time though. I might have said it also before, but we were only acquaintances to the degree of having met each other in an Opera house ball. It was after entering Asterisk that we came to meddle in this and that.”

“Heeh...”

That was a bit unexpected.

“By the way, is Claudia’s father also an executive of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation?”

“No, he isn’t an executive. He is something like her mother’s secretary or a subordinate under exclusive contract. Probably something close to an executive.”

“...Why is that?”

“I’ve seen him several times, but he was too human. One can only become an executive of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation by abandoning their humanity.”

Julis resolutely said.

Ayato recalled the conversation about Danilo that he exchanged with Helga the other day.

“Therefore, I personally think that her father is someone giving a much more favorable impression than her mother. ——At least, you can see that he holds his daughter dearly.”

“Heeh...”

If so, he was probably a good father.

“——Um, Princess, may I have a little of your time? His Majesty ordered me to get this bottle of wine, but I don’t know where it is stored...”

Then in a panic state, Flora called out to Julis.

“Ah, this, huh. Flora is still an apprentice, so you can’t enter the wine cellar... Jeez Big Brother, he must have definitely forgotten... Sorry, Ayato. I’ll leave you alone for a while.”

“Got it. I’ll also go get some fresh air.”

Ayato who saw off Julis accompanying Flora was heading to the terrace.

“——Ah. y-yes... um...”

But, he stopped on the way after spotting Kirin.

Being accosted by multiples invitees, she was clearly troubled... or rather it looked like she would burst into tears at any moment.

Judging from anyone's perspective Kirin today was charming, and the men here were very assertive. So, it was natural that she was accosted, but...

“——Kirin-chan, may I a little?”

“Ah...! Y-Yes! I'm sorry, excuse me.”

When Ayato called out to her, Kirin's expression suddenly brightened and she rushed over to him.

“Thank you, Ayato-senpai. You saved me.”

“You're welcome.”

As Ayato smiled, Kirin cast her eyes down with a relieved face.

“I...I'm not so quick-witted, so I'm not good at talking with people I don't know.”

Kirin was quite talkative when it came to fencing; but it would certainly be difficult for her, who was modest and quiet when it came to anything other than that, to deal with such high society alone.

“Besides... I’m not beautiful like the Senpais...”

“Eh? I don’t think that at all though.”

“B-But, as expected... such a dress doesn’t suit a child like me.”

Kirin looked downward with a dejected face.

She seemed to have a lack of confidence as usual.

As Ayato heaved a small sigh and stopped, he faced Kirin and clearly said.

“I said it a while ago, but that dress really suits you. It looks very mature and it’s beautiful.”

“Eh...”

Kirin’s face immediately dyed red.

It might be a slightly pompous way of speaking, but a fact is a fact. The chic dress strongly displayed Kirin’s still cherubic features like an adult. Unlike Julis and Claudia who originally possessed a gorgeous atmosphere, though splendid, she brought about a fresh (innocent) atmosphere.

“T-Thank you... very much...”

Said Kirin with a voice seeming to vanish.

“Y-Yes. Well then, for the time being shall we go to the terrace?”

When Ayato was about to begin walking as he said so while being a little embarrassed, Kirin tightly grasped his sleeve.

“U-U-Um... Is it all right if I ask you something?”

“What is it?”

“U-Um... I also want to link arms with Ayato-senpai... when Julis-san did so a while ago, you two were really cool, so...”

“I don’t really mind, but... I don’t know whether I can properly escort you.”

After all, he was only relying on Julis a while ago.

“I-It’s all right...! By only you doing it, it’s already enough for me...!”

“...Well in that case, yes.”

When Ayato bent his left arm, Kirin nervously drew her body nearer and entwined her right arm.

But perhaps because she was not really familiar with it, she firmly stuck her body to him; and rather than linking arms, it felt more like she was hugging him. Since at Julis’ time, it was mostly

her hand that she applied, he wasn't that much conscious about it; but this time, Kirin's rich swellings were pressed against his arm and he could not calm down at all.

Moreover, the degree of exposure of Kirin's current outfit was totally different from her usual uniform.

"Errr, Kirin-chan? It'll be better if you separate your body a little..."

"Eh? Ah, s-sorry...!"

The moment when Kirin was about to separate her body after saying so——

"...It's always Kirin, it's not fair."

"Wow!?"

Suddenly, his other arm was strongly pulled by Saya who suddenly appeared.

By his reaction, Kirin's chest was further pressed against his left arm.

"S-Saya! What are you doing so suddenly?!"

"...I also want to link arms with Ayato. It's a fair demand."

"Even so, don't suddenly jump on me!"

If it felt like Kirin was hugging him, then it felt like Saya was clinging to him... or rather pulling him.

It could no longer be qualified as linking arms.

Besides, after making this much racket, the surrounding stares were painful, and Ayato was worried about how this situation was regarded. If possible, he wanted to evacuate to the terrace as soon as possible.

“——Hahaha. That’s what I’d call having a pretty flower in each hand. I’m really envious.”

Such a voice was uttered from behind Ayato and the two girls.

When they looked back, a gentleman in his prime who grew a very neat mustache was broadly smiling.

“Ah, no sorry. You were noisily chatting, so...”

It was a face which was not among those Ayato greeted today.

“No, no, that’s also a youth’s privilege. It’s indeed good to be full of vigor. I expected no less from people who displayed an outstanding performance in the <Phoenix>.”

“Haa... Thank you.”

“By the way, do you intend to also participate in the next <Gryps>? There is also a rumor that you will join Miss Enfield’s team.”

“No, that’s still a little...”

He could not afford to carelessly answer here, so he gave an evasive answer.

“Hmm, I see, I see. In that case —— I think that it’d be for your best interests not to join her team.”

“——!”

Immediately after, the depths of the eyes of the gentleman with a friendly smile gleamingly shone and gave off a dangerous presence.

Saya and Kirin also immediately separated their bodies from Ayato and squared off.

“...What do you mean by that?”

Ayato said so as to inquire while gradually retreating.

The gentleman in front of them was a <Starpulse Generation>—— and a quite powerful one at that.

“What, it’s just as I said. If you guys join Miss Enfield’s team, there is someone who would be very troubled. My duty is to prevent it somehow, you see... Thus, I came here to ask.”

The gentleman grinned while politely saying so.

The people around too probably noticed the strange situation. Noise spread like ripples and people distanced themselves from around the gentleman as they ran away.

“——And if we refuse?”

“That would be quite regrettable. It would pain me to harm my cute juniors.”

At that moment, mana violently blew around the gentleman.

“So... I shall leave that task to this child.”

A complex magic square suddenly emerged in mid-air and a huge creature slowly appeared from there.

At first glance, it looked like a lion, but the size was quite different. It would be about five meter long. Moreover, it had bat-like wings on its back and its tail was a snake. Its appearance closely resembled the very chimera coming out of myth and though not very much, it appeared unlikely to be a living creature.

If anything, it was closely similar to the pseudo-dragons which attacked Ayato and Kirin before. However, creatures' life force could still be felt from them, but such a thing could not be felt from the chimera before them. It felt just like a lump of mana.

“Ayato-senpai...”

Kirin probably realized the same thing, too. She turned a gaze as she wanted to say something, but there was something who took priority over that now.

The invitees ran about trying to escape while screaming and as the sounds of tableware and glasses which broke echoed, the gentleman respectfully bowed behind the chimera.

“Then with this, I shall excuse myself.”

“Wait!”

Ayato was going to run after the gentleman at once, but the chimera flung its huge arm as to prevent that.

“Kuh...!”

Contrary to its large build, its movement was surprisingly fast, and at that opportunity, the gentleman disappeared on the other side of the terrace.

“What is this?!”

Julis and Claudia also came running, but there was no time to explain the circumstances.

“Julis, what about Jolbert-san?”

“Guards already made him evacuate. There’s no problem.”

Fortunately, it looked like the chimera's aim was only Ayato and company, so it showed no signs of attacking the invitees running about.

As they stole a glance behind, a security-like squad set up gun type luxes.

But because there were still invitees remaining in the hall, it looked like they couldn't fire carelessly.

"Gururuh...!"

The chimera issued a low roar and its deep red eyes stared at Ayato.

"...Anyway, let's first lure this guy outside. We'll involve other people if we fight in here."

"That certainly sounds good, but... even if you say fight, do you have a weapon?"

"Ah..."

He realized it for the first time after Claudia said that, but Ayato did not certainly have <Ser-Versta> or any other lux now. It was probably the same for Kirin and Claudia.

"Fufufu, then I guess I have no choice but to do something about it."

However, Saya grabbed the hand of Julis who tried to step forward as she said so.

“It’s all right. I always carry a lux.”

When Saya raised the skirt of her dress after immediately saying that, she took out an activation body from the holder hidden underneath.

“Oh, as expected of Saya... Is what I would like to say, but if you were to use your lux here, it’d be a great disaster!”

All the luxes Saya possessed had a frighteningly high destructive power.

It’d be different if it was Asterisk, but it was not something that she could casually shoot in a place like this.

“That’s goes for Julis, too.”

“Regarding my skill, I can adjust the firepower, and above all, my hit accuracy is different. Don’t lump me with her.”

Julis pouted in displeasure at Claudia’s words.

“Well anyway, I’ll drive it outside. After that, I’ll leave the rest to Saya and Julis.”

“B-But, no matter what you say, doing it empty-handed is...”

“It’s all right. Judging from its movement a little while ago, I think I can do something about it.”

When Ayato said so and calmly released his power, he slowly stepped forward.

The chimera built a stance as it was cautious of Ayato’s movement and swung its arm with a side blow when it thought that Ayato had entered its range.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Though the chimera’s roar shook the air, Ayato dodged it only by a slight movement.

(...I wonder if no one will be involved this way.)

At the same time by the state of “cognition”, he grasped the position of the invitees remaining in the hall and shortened the distance while carefully calculating so that his actions did not cause damage.

“Guaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

The arm which let its sharp claws shine once again attacked Ayato, but he greatly jumped and evaded it——

“Ayato-senpai, watch out!”

But as if having predicted it, the chimera’s tail snarled at him.

The jaw of a snake which could swallow whole a human approached Ayato, but he rotated his body in the air and kicked down the snake's head with the momentum.

“Gyufu!”

Stepping over the crushed head, Ayato landed as he sneaked around the chimera's side — and then fixed his breathing in an instant.

“Amagiri Bright Dragon-style, Grappling Technique — ”
Chest Piercing Feather””

When Ayato slipped under the chimera, he kicked up its abdomen with all his strength while twisting his right leg.

“Gugiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiih!”

The chimera's huge body soared in the air while screaming.

Ayato jumped again while twisting his body and drove three consecutive kicks into the face of the chimera which fainted in agony in mid-air.

“Amagiri Bright Dragon-style, Grappling Technique — ”
Unbreakable Roar””

“——!”

Being blown away three times without being able to utter a sound, the chimera fell over to the other side of the terrace while breaking the glass of the window.

“Saya! Julis!”

“...Roger.”

“Leave it to me!”

He chased it with Saya who’d already deployed Helnekrom and Julis who enhanced her mana. Ahead of the terrace was the courtyard; the chimera’s huge body lying on the lawn tried to get up while tottering.

Fortunately, the other side of the courtyard was a lake.

“Bloom proudly — Six-Petal ^{Amaryllis} Burst Firebloom!”

“...Kaboom”

The next moment, the released fireballs and light bullet directly hit the chimera.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Blasts and explosive flames soared, and a scream of death throes resounded. The chimera’s body could be seen slowly melting inside the flames. And its highly concentrated mana scattered around along with it.

“As expected, this thing wasn’t a living thing...”

Julis muttered with a grim face and Ayato also nodded silently.

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“...Oh my, a chimera is not even a match for them, huh. It looks like I underestimated them a little. If they can do that much without weapons, it’d be a little troublesome, I guess.”

As the man who was looking into something like a telescope while standing on the lake muttered in disappointment, he snapped his fingers.

Then under his feet — something big lurking in the lake began to move quietly.

“Well, whatever. I didn’t want to invest myself that much in a work of this level, but... It would be a shame to miss such a precious customer, too.”

The man told so to himself and disappeared into the darkness on the lake.

Chapter 4 – Julis and the Orphanage

The next day, Ayato and company were summoned to the royal palace by Jolbert.

“Gustave Malraux?”

“Yes. Well, I don’t really know, either. According to the police, it seems to be the name of yesterday’s criminal.”

They were in the same room as yesterday and Jolbert’s casual outfit was practically the same, too. The only difference was that Maria was not there. Apparently, one of Jolbert’s mistresses stayed in bed due to the shock of yesterday’s incident and Maria went to visit her. What a really wonderful relation.

Ayato and company were also asked a lot of questions by the police yesterday, but partly due to the fact that they were the King’s honor guests, it was a polite interaction and they were freed earlier than expected.

“They say that he’s an internationally wanted criminal. He seemed to have been in Asterisk in the past and errr, if I remember correctly... huh? Which academy did he attend again?”

Jolbert folded his arms and pondered as he forgot. It made one wonder whether he treated this seriously even though a criminal attacked his royal palace.

“It’s Allekant Academy, I think. He’s a celebrity in that field.”

Having spoken in his stead was Claudia.

“When you say celebrity, do you mean something like winning a <Festa>?”

“No. Gustave Malraux was in the ranking of up-and-coming students, but he has never participated in a <Festa>. He is — one of the members who brought about the <Dusk of Jade>.”

“!” “ I see, I remember now! So that man is the <
Echid Nix
Magician of Beast Creation>!”

Julis half rose to her feet with a startled face.

“When you say <Dusk of Jade>, you’re talking about the hostage incident which occurred in Asterisk in the past, right? It’s said that the Captain of the Star Hunter Guards settled it alone...”

“Yes, it’s the greatest terrorist incident in Asterisk’s history.”

Claudia nodded to Kirin’s words.

Though Ayato did not know the details, he had also heard that name before. It was the incident which was the origin of why the Redevelopment Area was born.

“...So that means that man with a mustache is a terrorist?”

“No, it’s slightly different. The <Dusk of Jade> was an event which brought about 77 criminals including students’ sympathizers too, but about a quarter seems to have money reasons. Gustave Malraux was among them.”

When Claudia took out her portable terminal and operated it, multiple space windows opened.

All of them seemed to be news regarding the terrorist incident.

“All these are incidents recognized for Gustave Malraux’s involvement. A terrorist is to the bitter end someone who only aims to achieve some political purpose, but he has no such thoughts. That can also be surmised from the fact that after the <Dusk of Jade>, he cooperated with various terrorist organizations with different principles and position.”

“In other words, he moved only for the basis of work, huh — wait a minute. More importantly, what do you mean by after the <Dusk of Jade>? If Captain Lindvall settled the incident, wasn’t he caught at that time...?”

However, Claudia ruefully shook her head to Ayato’s words.

“The masterminds in the <Dusk of Jade> as well as the main members were mostly caught, but about seven people succeeded in escaping. Gustave Malraux is one of them, and that’s precisely why he’s famous.”

“...I see.”

His name would indeed be famous after that.

“There are still many unclear parts about the <Dusk of Jade> though. The guard captain had reported everything about the details until the event resolution, but the background and processing after the incident were kept in the dark under the Integrated Enterprise Foundation’s supervision. It’s one of the taboo topics in Asterisk.”

The face of Julis who said so was clearly displeased.

“So... What kind of ability does that man have as a <Dante>?”

Answering to Kirin who timidly raised her hand was as expected Claudia.

“Gustave Malraux is a <Dante> who was called an unparalleled genius in the conversion construction technique of mana from his school days. His ability is... as you saw last night, something like using magic beasts.”

“Even if you say magic beasts, that one was man-made, right?”

Ayato remembered last night’s chimera. Although it moved well, it was clearly not a living creature.

“Yes, of course. Up to this date, there is no ability user who succeeded in creating a life (living one), and it’s also said that it’s theoretically impossible. You could say that that was a living body model in which the skeleton, muscles and body tissues were all made without exception with conversion by mana.”

“Our ability is the power of image. If you spoil it, the power will be weakened; conversely if you establish a firm image within your mind, the mana’s movement will speed up and the power will be enhanced, too. Although there is no universal benchmark, in the case that you materialize not a phenomenon, but a substance, the ingenuity of the image is often effective. At first glance, it totally looked like that magic beast was alive. No matter how strong the ability is, it’ll first be impossible to materialize an image to that extent if you normally think about it.”

Julis who was the only ability user among the people present indifferently explained.

“But, Gustave Malraux made that possible. With his overflowing talent and by spending a great amount of time.”

“Time?”

“It isn’t his own words, but some people among the arrested terrorists have testified for that in order to create a new magic beast, he needed from several months to several years depending on what he wanted to create. By spending that much time, he would surely squeeze an image to the details.”

A few years is again, quite a patient story.

“Although, mana certainly converts all phenomenon or substances, but as a fundamental principle, it’s impossible to fix them. No, it isn’t that it’s impossible, but if one is to maintain such a huge magic beast’s body for a long period of time, he would

have to keep converting an unimaginable amount of mana. Such a thing is impossible no matter how tremendous the prana one has.”

“Then, that was...?”

“If we’ve left it alone, it would’ve probably lapsed only a dozen of minutes.”

“In which case, it’s very convenient for terrorist attacks. After all, it isn’t necessary to retrieve it.”

“I see... There is also that viewpoint, huh.”

As Ayato said in admiration, Julis suddenly frowned.

“...Big Brother!”

“——Hmm? Ah, sorry, sorry. I slept late last night after all.”

When looking over, Jolbert was dozing off sitting on the sofa as such.

“Big Brother, you should feel a little tense. The royal palace was attacked, you know?”

“It wasn’t the royal palace who was attacked, but you guys, right?”

“Then, how about worrying a little about your cute little sister?”

“Hahaha, if I were to worry about you for something of that extent now, my body wouldn’t last.”

A sibling-like familiarity could be felt in that exchange between Julis and Jolbert.

At first, Ayato thought that they didn't get along, but unexpectedly it did not seem to be the case.

"In the first place, to let a criminal through so easily, what are the guards here doing?"

"No, please don't blame the guards for that. It looks like that Gustave man falsified his status with that of a Research Institute official of Galaxy, and the Galaxy's ID which he used on that occasion seemed to be genuine. It can't be helped. It'll be impossible even for me."

"An Integrated Enterprise Foundation's ID?"

Claudia knitted her brows.

"Is something wrong?"

"Integrated Enterprise Foundation's IDs are given only to people of the head offices or under the direct control of the organization. It is originally not something which should be available so easily..."

"He spoke as if he was requested by someone, so I wonder whether a big organization backs him... But, even if we assume that, why make such a request...?"

—There is someone who will be troubled if Ayato and the others join Claudia's team.

Gustave certainly said so.

If he told Ayato and company not to participate in the <Gryps>, it could still be understandable. After all, they were respectively the tags which won the <Phoenix> and were in the best four. Be it for a team aiming for the championship or for other academies, there would be no mistaking it that they were an eyesore.

But, telling them not to join Claudia's team meant, in other words, it would be troublesome if Claudia's team became strong; but any other team she could form would pose no issue.

(In that case...)

"Ah, that's right. One more thing, I received a request from the police to assign guards for you guys, but what will you do?"

"It's unnecessary for me, but if there is someone who needs it, they should do so."

"...Actually, isn't a guard necessary for the Princess first and foremost?"

When Ayato said so with a wry smile, Julis snorted as if bored.

"If they've spare energy to protect me, it'd be much more useful to invest it in the search for Gustave Malraux. We haven't yet found even his traces, right?"

“Judging from the report I received in the morning, it looks like it. Well, our police haven’t that much of a staff after all”

Jolbert spoke like it was somebody else’s problem.

As a result of having talked at this place, it was settled that Ayato and company did not need guards.

“I Got it. I’ll tell that, in fact, you are stronger than our guards.”

Aside from a case of practical use of an organization or execution ability of a mission, when comparing only the simple individual combat ability, Asterisk’s students received a fairly high evaluation. This was because of the fact that characteristically, <Starpulse Generation> with many battle opportunities were more adapted to it.

Simply put, it meant that the <Starpulse Generation>, who were in a place where battles were actively performed like Asterisk, were stronger (Besides, there was also the fact that the use restriction of luxes, ogre luxes and abilities were loose, thus it was easier to accumulate experiences in actual fighting). Asterisk’s graduates were also no exception to this, and when they got used to a peaceful life after graduation — even if one independently trained their body daily — they could see that their combat ability dropped remarkably compared to their school days.

The world was still far from peace, and war and terrorism still existed, but even so they were controlled to some extent by the Integrated Enterprise Foundation and the occupation of always

entering in the battlefield was extremely limited. Of course, average guards and police officers underwent training, but at least up-and-coming students probably exceed them in terms of combat ability.

But naturally, those with combat ability higher than Asterisk's students were not few, either. The members of the Special Forces held by the Integrated Enterprise Foundation and those of the elite troops of major PMCS were incomparable with students in terms of combat experience, and there were also those who put themselves in the world of violence as a criminal like Gustave.

"If there was an army, there would have been more ways to do things; but we don't have that."

"Is there no army?"

When Ayato asked again slightly surprised, Jolbert plainly nodded.

"Yes. In case of an emergency, we are to borrow soldiers from the Integrated Enterprise Foundation. From Solneige and Frauenlob, that is. Besides, some military units should be stationed in the Research Institutes of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation, but they probably won't move unless sparks reach them."

At present, the military section owned by the Integrated Enterprise Foundation and the PMCS far exceeded the military force of the existing nations. But still, the country's polity needed to maintain a certain level of military force.

“...It truly is a puppet nation.”

“You put it bluntly, eh.”

Jolbert rather looked at Saya in admiration.

“But, as expected I couldn’t afford to leave it as is without taking measures when the honor guests were attacked. I took proper measures so as to not get in your way.”

“Do as you like. Are we done talking?”

Julis said so and stood up, but Jolbert stretched out a hand to stop her.

“Wait a moment. I said yesterday that I want to talk with you and Amagiri-kun, right?”

At his words, Julis stole a glance at Ayato.

When Ayato nodded, in a way as to say that it could not be helped, she once again sat down on the sofa.

- -

“So, what do you want to talk about so much that you went as far as to have Claudia and the others leave?”

“Yes. There are two things, but... Now then, I wonder by which I should talk about first.”

“...Either is fine, so let’s quickly get it over with.”

“I see. Then, I’ll begin the one easier to speak about. ——
Amagiri-kun”

As Jolbert turned to face Ayato, he said with a smile.

“Won’t you consider marrying Julis?”

“.....”

For a moment, unable to comprehend what he said, Ayato stiffened.

That also goes for Julis sitting next to him as she became completely rigid like a stone, but her face immediately turned bright red and she began shaking.

“W-W-W...What are you suddenly saying, Big Brother?!
T-There is also a limit to a joke!”

“Yes, well, I’m not saying to do it right now. How about beginning with the engagement for now?”

While splendidly ignoring Julis’ angry voice, Jolbert deeply leaned forward.

Ayato finally came to his senses and though flustered, honestly answered.

“N-No, even if you tell me such a thing so suddenly, I don’t know what to say... I mean, you may have misunderstood it, but Julis and I really don’t have that kind of relation...”

“Guh...! T-That’s right, Big Brother! In the first place, why’d you bring up the subject to Ayato while ignoring me?!”

Though Julis snarled at him, Jolbert did not even try to look her way.

“Yes, I’ve heard about your relation in a report from Flora. I was a little surprised though. But, that’s fine. It isn’t really a problem now.”

“It’s a big problem!”

There, Jolbert finally turned his gaze to Julis.

“I’m saying that while thinking about you, Julis. It isn’t as if you don’t know what will happen at this rate, right?”

“...Humph, mind your own business.”

Jolbert’s eyes were serious. Perhaps overwhelmed by them, Julis’ tone slightly dropped.

“What do you mean?”

“It means that if left alone, Julis will become like me in the near future.”

Jolbert exaggeratedly shrugged his shoulders.

To Ayato who was unable to understand what he meant, Julis said with a sour look.

“In other words, it means that I’ll be given someone convenient by the Integrated Enterprise Foundation.”

“!”

That meant that Julis would be forced to marry someone.

When Ayato realized that from her words, he received a shock greater than he thought.

“It’s fine for me. No matter what kind of woman is to be my partner, I have the confidence that I will love her. But Julis, you’re different.”

“.....”

Julis was silent, but it was clear that her silence meant that he was right.

“Then before it’s too late, you should at least choose a congenial partner. You were able to get along as tag partners, and it’s not like Julis dislikes Amagiri-kun, right?”

“That’s... Of course, I don’t dislike him, but...”

Julis who muttered something in a subdued voice suddenly raised her face.

“Big Brother! Don’t tell me the reason why you organized the triumphant return parade yesterday was...!”

“Yes. I thought to make a light introduction.”

That explained why the two of them were sat side by side.

“B-But, why so suddenly...? It’s not like we’ve never had that kind of talk so far. And I remember that I’ve rejected all of them!”

“The situation has changed, Julis. You’ve won the <Phoenix> after all.”

“!”

One could see that Julis had suddenly gasped.

“So far, the Integrated Enterprise Foundation wasn’t serious, so I was able to somehow manage it; but your value increases at a stretch due to this win. They will be definitely thinking about holding you down somewhere.”

“T-That’s...”

“But if it’s now, I can still take the initiative. Nowadays, there is no annoying custom like social status, rather there is no better status than the <Phoenix>’s tag partner.”

“Guh...”

Julis averted her gaze in frustration.

“With that said, how about it, Amagiri-kun? This country may be nothing compared to Japan, but at least, you wouldn’t live here in discomfort. I don’t think it’s that bad a deal.”

Jolbert said so with a smile on his whole face.

“...That’s right.”

After a short pause, Ayato answered as to persuade himself.

“Certainly, there may not be inconvenience. But... there isn’t some kind of freedom there, either. Am I wrong?”

“There is nothing as complete freedom in this world. I think there’s no choice but accept some ties of obligation.”

“But, there should be room to choose how to accept which ties of obligation. Julis came to Asterisk to break that.”

To Ayato’s words, Julis raised her face as she was surprised.

“Choice, huh... isn’t it a luxurious desire? There are many people with no room for choice.”

“That may be so. But —— even so I can’t become the shackles which will bind Julis.”

Ayato decisively asserted.

Jolbert silently looked at the eyes of such an Ayato for a while, but he deeply exhaled before long as if giving in.

“Phew... You’re more serious than I imagined. I got it, I got it. I’ll leave this talk aside for now.”

Saying so, he raised both hands as to give up.

“Ah, but can I say one more thing?”

“Yes?”

“If Julis herself wishes for those shackles, will you accept it?”

“Wha...! B-Big Brother, what are you...!”

“T-That’s... I’ll think about it when that time comes...”

Seeing that Ayato’s and Julis’s faces simultaneously dyed red, Jolbert contentedly nodded

“Hmm, I see. There seems to be a possibility.”

“——I-If you only wanted to talk about this, then we’ll excuse ourselves! Let’s go, Ayato!”

When Julis vigorously stood up with her face still bright red, she squared her shoulders and headed to the door.

“Wait a moment, Julis. Haven’t I said there were two things I want to talk about?”

“...If it is another stupid talk, I won’t forgive you.”

Julis who stopped in front of the door looked back and glared at Jolbert.

“Oh, it’s not that long a talk.”

As Jolbert paused there for a moment, he revealed his usual frivolous smile.

“Julis, can you not participate in the <Gryps>?”

At that moment, all expressions vanished from Julis’ face.

“——Are you seriously saying that, Big Brother?”

A cold, and low voice calmly resounded through the room. It was as if the room’s temperature dropped at a stretch.

“Of course, I’m serious.”

“Let me hear your reason.”

“Didn’t you see in the triumphant return parade? Julis, your current popularity is tremendous. If you’ve any more achievements, I might lose my position. That’d be slightly problematic, so I hope you won’t participate in the <Gryps> if possible.”

“...I refuse.”

As Julis said only that, she went out of the room violently closing the door.

One could feel how angry she was from her violent footsteps gradually fading away outside of the room.

“...Is it all right. She’s seriously angry, you know?”

“Looks like it. How long has it been, I wonder? That Julis has been this angry.”

Jolbert said so and cacklingly laughed.

“Haa... I’ll run after her.”

As expected, he could not leave Julis like that alone.

But, Jolbert hailed such an Ayato.

“I know where she’s headed, so don’t worry. I’ll tell you the place later, so can you keep me company a little more?”

“...What is it?”

“Well, I thought to ask you to also try and persuade Julis if possible, but... it seems to be impossible looking at your face.”

“...Yes.”

Even if it’s Ayato, he didn’t think that he could persuade Julis in that state and he did not even intend to do so in the first place. After all, he had decided to be Julis’ strength.

“Mmm, I give up...”Jolbert grumbled so while scratching his head, but contrary to his words, he did not seem to have really given up.

“Don’t tell me you were serious when you said it a while ago?”

“Didn’t I say so? I’m seriously serious; I desire it from the bottom of my heart. Try thinking about it a little; what do you think will happen if Julis were to win the next <Gryps>?”

“Well... Her popularity will rise more than it is now.”

“Probably. Jeez, the citizens are really selfish. Even though when Julis was born, they were saying things such as a Princess being of <Starpulse Generation>is disgusting and frightening.”

Jolbert sarcastically twisted his lips.

“After all, I think it’ll be sad if that happens and I might be relieved from my post. It’s only because I’m obedient to the Integrated Enterprise Foundation and an apathetic dimwit in both politics and work that I can sit on this country’s throne”

As the saying, “it’s better if the Palanquin was lighter.”^[7]

“For the Integrated Enterprise Foundation, it’s a piece of cake to replace the King at the head of this country. Now then, when that happens, the next person to sit there would be——”

“——!”

There, Ayato finally realized.

“...Julis is serious and gentle. So, she can’t become like me. She’ll probably try to change this country and try to help people in dire straits. But in this country which is completely under the Integrated Enterprise Foundation’s control, it’s impossible. And Julis is aware of that. Precisely because she knew that only too well, she went to Asterisk. Julis is only suffering.”

“.....”

“I still have a higher utility value now. No, more exactly, Julis’ value is low. As you know, Julis is rebellious to the Integrated Enterprise Foundation. But when the time comes, it’d be easy for the Integrated Enterprise Foundation to force Julis to do what they tell her. By doing something like using this whole country as hostage for example. So, if Julis’ value were to become higher than mine...”

Saying up to there, Jolbert smiled sadly.

In short, it was the same as the talk of marriage a little while ago. The more Julis did her best, the more Julis’ position here —— for Julis at least——would turn for the worst.

“Now then, Amagiri-kun. I’ll ask again.”

Jolbert stared straight at Ayato.

“Could you somehow persuade Julis?”

“...I can’t”

Even so, Ayato's reply did not change.

Of course.

After all, Julis chose that path despite understanding all that.

"Haa... I see. I understand."

When Jolbert leaned his back on the sofa, he looked up at the sky with a wry smile.

"Well, it can't be helped. In that case, I guess I'll exert myself further on being a dimwit."

He said so and slowly closed his eyes.

"Jolbert-san..."

"It's fine. I may not look like it, but I'm enjoying my current position. It's also my true intention of not wanting to hand it to Julis."

Jolbert looked at Ayato as he opened only one eye.

"——Julis should be at the orphanage on the opposite bank of the lake. Since she was child, she would always go there whenever she was troubled. Sorry, but I'll leave it to you."

After Ayato deeply bowed towards Jolbert, he left the room at a quick pace to run after Julis.

- -

Unlike until yesterday, the sky was covered by thick clouds.

Snow which danced down here and there grew hazy to the white of one's breath and disappeared.

"It's here, huh..."

It was about 30 minutes by car from the royal palace. On the hill in the outskirts of the slums, there was the church.

The church had an old structure built with brick and wooden framework; there was also a two-storied building standing there and connected to it. It was much bigger than the image he had when he heard the description from Julis, but as expected he could not deny that it was quite shabby overall. Although surrounded by a high fence, it fell apart here and there and there were also places hardly usable.

When he set foot on the site, high and frolic voices peculiar to children could be heard from behind the church. As he was going there while firmly stepping on the snow thinly piled up, children of still tender ages and Julis were playing as they bandied snow around.

"Ah! It's Amagiri Ayato"

One among them noticed Ayato and raised his voice.

“It’s true!”

“Amazing!”

While the children raised their voices one after another, Julis wearing a black coat slowly turned her face.

“This was early than expected. Did you hear from Big Brother?”

“Yes, I did.”

Julis’ tone and expression were calm.

Rather, she clearly looked depressed.

“You too, Julis. When did you arrive here? Just to note, I came by car.”

After Julis left Jolbert’s room, not that much time should have actually passed until Ayato ran after her. He immediately asked Flora and had her send a car (since Flora herself was still in the middle of work, she could not tag along with him), and even thought that he could possibly catch up to her on the way, but...

“I’ve a secret route which I use since I was child. So you couldn’t catch up by car.”

“...I see.”

In fact, if a <Starpulse Generation> was serious, it was not impossible to arrive earlier than a car which could only take the roadway. If it was a path which they travelled on frequently, then all the more so.

“Ara, I was wondering why it was so bustling, so it was a visitor, Julis.”

An elderly Sister who slowly opened the window of the church peeked through there.

“Sister Therese —— Ah, I’ll introduce him. This is...”

“It’s fine; even I’ve watched the <Phoenix>. ——Welcome, Amagiri Ayato-san”

The Sister called Therese said so with a gentle smile.

“Though I cannot provide you a very decent accommodation, if you are fine with it, how about tea?”

“Ah, yes. Please.”

“Great. Then, please come in.”

When he entered the church with Julis as he was suggested to, a passage connected immediately to the (two-storied) building could be seen.

Several other Sisters were busily working inside, and children somewhat older than those who were playing outside were helping them.

“Since the National Day is close, they are currently preparing for it.”

“Heeh...”

Julis stopped and nostalgically looked at that scene, but when she came to her senses startled, she began to walk again.

“Sorry, it’s just nostalgic, you see”

“Did you also help with it in the past?”

“Well... once. I don’t think I was that much of a help though.”

When Julis said so with a complicated expression.

“——Fufufu, that’s right. Certainly, the time when Julis had begun to show up here, she was a child who could really do nothing. No matter what she helped with, she was only holding back the others.”

Therese who was walking as she approached Ayato and Julis laughed teasingly.

“Sister Therese... Please don’t tease me so much.”

“I am sorry. But, to think that such a child won the <Phoenix>.”

The atmosphere between Julis who smile wryly and Therese who gently smiled was like that of a true parent and child.

There, he finally noticed, but it seemed like Therese was a <Starpulse Generation>.

Therese guided Ayato and Julis to a room somewhat like a dining room inside the building.

An indentured wooden long table and chairs stood in a line, and they sat as suggested by Therese.

“Once again, welcome Amagiri Ayato-san. I am Therese. I am in charge of this church and the orphanage.”

When Therese sitting opposite to them said so, a still young Sister carried tea in the right timing. After that Sister politely greeted Ayato, she chuckled towards Julis sitting next to him.

“Welcome back, Julis. I watched the <Phoenix>. You did it.”

“Fufufu, well it’s only natural.”

“Oh, look here whose talking big now. Even though you cried all the time before.”

That Sister was probably the same age as Ayato and Julis. She seemed to be a <Starpulse Generation> like Therese. While nudging Julis with her elbow, she was happily frolicking in a low voice. Julis also responded to it with a carefree smile; from that atmosphere one could understand that they had an affable

relationship. Beside her, several other Sisters of the same age gathered around Julis.

(Being here like this, she looks like an ordinary girl one could find anywhere...)

Because Julis usually felt strained, he found such an aspect of her fresh and was strangely happy for some reason.

“...What a relief.”

“Eh?”

Ayato returned his gaze to Therese who suddenly muttered so.

“I’m glad that the one that Julis chose is a person like you.”

“No, I’m not...”

“It’s all right. I understand with how you were looking at Julis just now.”

As Therese pleasantly smiled, she turned towards Julis and the Sisters and clapped her hands.

“Yes, yes, leave it at that and return to your work. Otherwise, we won’t make it for the Epiphany^[8].”

“Yeees.”

The Sisters reluctantly left.

After having seen them off, Therese turned to Ayato with a serious face.

“Now then — regarding the incident with Flora, I am sorry to have caused you trouble.”

“Ah, no, it wasn’t actually me who saved Flora-chan...”

As Ayato was gratefully waving his hands, Julis lightly glared at him with an amazed face.

“You say that. But in that situation, we wouldn’t have been able to save Flora without everyone’s cooperation. Let’s leave it at I’m a relative and you’re a representative for the time being.”

“Yeah...”

Being spoken up to there, he could only concede.

“Besides, the main problem was that I let that child go alone after all. Even though I should have had a Sister went with her whether she liked it or not.”

Therese said so and feebly shook her head.

“Speaking of which, some Sisters here seems to be of <Starpulse Generation>.”

“Yes, including me, there are four. There is a little more if we include the children though.”

If they were not being gathered expressly, having four <Starpulse Generation> of the same age then in an institution of this scale was quite many. Moreover, from what Ayato saw a short while ago, he could understand that they piled up training to some degree judging from the way they walked.

“By the way, Sister Therese is a <Strega> master for me.”

“Eh? Is that so?”

“I taught her with the thought that she should become able to defend herself, but she was unexpectedly a quick learner. She can handle her power better than me now.”

Certainly for someone who learned by herself, Julis’ tactics were quite refined.

Especially the timing to set setting type abilities and the ways to lure her opponent to it were probably based on some sort of theory .

“Excuse me if it may appear impolite, but was Sister Therese also in Asterisk before?”

“Fufufu, no way. I only learned a little from a <Strega> acquaintance long ago, too.”

Therese said so and sweetly laughed.

“I’m teaching the art of self-defense not only to <Starpulse Generation>, but also to the children. Of course, not to all of them

since there are also children who aren't very good at or hate such a thing..."

Then, Ayato noticed that the eyes of Therese who nostalgically talked were looking behind him.

When he turned his head, there wasn't anything in particular in the room. However, he noticed that a neatly glazed building on the other side of the window could be seen.

"Is that... a greenhouse?"

"Yes. It was the favorite place of a child who was here before. She didn't like fighting... She really was a gentle child."

"....."

—Suddenly, Julis loudly stood up from the chair.

"Julis?"

"...Sorry. I'll go get some fresh air outside."

Julis said so and left the room.

"Phew..."

Therese looking at her with a sad face heaved a heavy sigh and muttered.

"As expected, it's still no good, huh..."

- -

When Ayato went outside, Julis was surrounded by the children.

“Everyone, my bad, but I’m going out for a little. Please tell that to the Sisters, too.”

Julis said so in a gentle voice as she squatted and looked at the children

“Eeh! Princess, are you going already?”

“You just came a short while ago.”

The children unanimously raised complaints, but Julis stroked their heads one by one while smiling wryly.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be right back. Until then, please go help the Sisters again. They seem to be having some trouble with the preparations of the festival.”

The children still revealed really dissatisfied faces, but even so they went back running towards the building as they accepted.

“Was that alright?”

“Yes. Let’s walk a little.”

Julis put on her hood and began to walk looking down.

As they went out of the site of the church, a desolate townscape spread out. It had an atmosphere close to that of the Redevelopment Area in Asterisk, but the scene was quite different.

The houses standing in a row were either so old that it seemed that they would collapse at any time, or were only shabby like shacks. There were apartment-like buildings, but their walls were full of countless cracks and graffiti. Trash was left on the road and several silhouettes of people who seemed to be residents gathered around a bonfire in a somewhat vacant land. When fleetingly looking at their figures, they were only staring aimlessly at the blazing flame with listless, dull eyes.

It was such a suffocating scene, as if the whole town was squashed by an invisible power.

“...Sorry. The atmosphere is somewhat unstable today.”

Julis opened her mouth before long.

“There are also such times.”

He didn’t know which part of the conversation with Therese made Julis reacted, but it was probably something important for Julis.

“If I’m not even able to control my own feelings, I can’t make irresponsible remarks to my brother.”

“...Jolbert-san worried about you.”

“...I know.”

Julis bit her lips as she said that.

“I know that my brother values me more than anything and how blessed I am thanks to that.”

It was a tone as if telling it to herself more than telling it to Ayato.

“Even so... No precisely for this reason, I can’t agree with this country’s state.”

“I think you’re doing your best. Even that orphanage, you no longer need to worry about them, right?”

As her wish from winning the <Phoenix>, Julis purchased this orphanage in Lieseltania and secured future funds. Even if it was self-satisfaction of only extending a helping hand to a relative, it did not change the fact that she could be proud of it.

“But, that’s just pouring water on a hot stone. In the end, the very system of this world keeps bringing forth these slums-like places, orphanages and children who had no way but to rely on them (orphanages).”

A world controlled by the Integrated Enterprise Foundation would continuously give birth to people with economical disadvantages. Its essence was disparity. Of course, that in itself was humanity’s endless karma since ancient times, but the

Integrated Enterprise Foundation accelerated it to a frightening degree.

“——I want to release at least even only this country from that curse. If it's impossible, then I want to deal a serious blow at least.”

“And that'll be... the wish of the next <Gryps>?”

When Ayato asked, Julis gave a small nod.

Certainly from the start, Julis openly declared aiming for the Grand Slam. In other words, she understood that only having won the <Festa> once was not enough at all.

“That orphanage's situation was quite critical economically. Therefore, I prioritized it first above all and saved it. That was my first goal and it was achieved.”

Julis suddenly stopped as she spoke up to there.

“But... Certainly all of this is my selfishness fawning on my brother's kindness. I...”

Strong affliction blurred in Julis' voice. This is the first time he'd seen Julis like this.

“Julis...”

As Ayato hesitated about what he should say to her.

“——!”

Julis suddenly raised her face.

Her expression filled with affliction was instantly repainted by surprise.

Her eyes were wide-open and her body was trembling.

“Just now, don’t tell me...”

“Julis?”

Julis’ eyes seemed to be looking at the car which passed them as it went through the slums a short while ago. That car seemed to be driving at a considerable speed and could no longer be seen.

“...No, there is no doubt. It’s certainly...!”

One could see that emotions like anger were flared up in her eyes and that she gritted her teeth.

“Julis? What is it...?”

“——Ayato. I’m sorry, but please return to the orphanage and wait for me there. A little business came up.”

Immediately after Julis said that, she suddenly started running.

And almost at full strength at that.

“Hey, Julis! What is it suddenly?!”

Even if he was asked to return, he couldn't leave Julis in this state alone.

Ayato also started running chasing Julis.

Since this neighborhood was the town's outskirts, the scenery around immediately changed to that of snow and forest. Julis seemed to be running after the car from a short while ago.

The narrow road which bent many times seemed to be heading to the mountains. As he saw that there were no other cars around, he guessed that it was probably not the main road.

"Julis!"

As expected, Ayato was superior to Julis in leg strength.

When Ayato overtook Julis, he stood before her as to block her way.

"Move aside, Ayato! I'm in a hurry!"

"I understand that just by looking. But, I can't let you go in your current state. Though I don't know what kind of reason it is, you should first calm down."

"That's...!"

Julis bent herself forward as she snarled at him, but then lowered her eyes.

“I know it myself...! But I beg you, Ayato...! Let me go!”

She might have calmed down just a little, but still Julis’ eyes blurred a strong feeling of anxiety. It must be something quite serious.

It was not possible for Ayato to reject such a strong entreaty.

“Haa... I got it. But, I’ll tag along with you.”

“Yes, I don’t mind.”

Julis nodded and started running immediately.

As if knowing where the car was headed, she chose a way which ramified inside the forest on the way without hesitation.

As they advanced in the forest covered with snow, they saw the car in question stopped a little ahead before long. Julis slowed down her speed, and Ayato followed that, too.

Then, Ayato noticed. The state of this neighborhood was strange. The state of the trees was different until a while ago.

When looking carefully, all the trees around this area seemed to have withered.

Even those withered trees were dying as they advanced and a huge gaping wide space opened ahead from the place where the car stopped. Perhaps if seen from above, it would seem like a circular plain had suddenly appeared in the middle of the forest.

Julis did not show a slight interest in the car and slowly advanced while only staring at one point in front of them. Ahead of it was a pure white snowy plain and footprints left there.

As they advanced so as to follow those footprints, Ayato noticed that the sensation of the ground was strange.

When he squatted down and looked at the snow, a pungent smell assailed his nose.

(Has the soil rotted...?)

The snow which fluttered down seemed to gradually increase in strength.

At this rate, it might turn into a snowstorm.

When he strained his eyes before long, a building which seemed to be an abandoned one could be seen in the center of the plain.

Although almost of the building was crumbled down and could hardly keep its original form, it seemed to be quite a large-scale facility.

In front of it was standing one silhouette.

Julis stopped just before it and called out towards the silhouette.

“——It’s been a while, Orphelia.”

Chapter 5 – The ^{Ereshkigal}<Venomous Witch>

Ayato unintentionally gasped at that name which Julis said.

“Orphelia, don’t tell me——”

At the same time, a sensation he has never experienced so far welled up in his chest. It was closely similar to uneasiness and it was strongly appealing to Ayato for something.

“...Why did you come?”

That silhouette slowly looked back.

She wore the uniform of Le Wolfe, but other than that she only wore long gloves covering up to her elbows and white tights; she did not even put on a coat within this snow. Her calm voice was cold as if freezing and dark and hollow as if resounding from the bottom of the ground. The amount of her prana was quite abundant and one could understand at first glance that it was spreading until every corner of her body.

However, what was impressive above all was her long pure white hair which melted into the surrounding snow and her ruby-like red pair of eyes. Like her voice, her eyes as if inlaying the red moon, which is a symbol of ill omen, retained a desolate darkness which would cause one to freeze. And yet, her expression was full of sadness as it looked like she would burst into tears at any moment.

“Is it really her...?”

Ayato had also seen her figure in the news before.

Orphelia Landlufen. She was Le Wolfe Black Institute's rank #1 who won two consecutive <Lindvolus>, and was called the strongest <Strega> in Asterisk's history alongside that Helga Lindvall.

There was no mistaking that the girl standing now in front of Ayato was the same <Venomous ^{Ereshkigal} Witch> which he saw in the news

“It's been about one year since then. I didn't think I'll meet you in such a place.”

Julis, though with still a grim face, continued in a somewhat nostalgic voice.

“...Even though I warned you many times to no longer get involved with me.”

But, Orphelia, with still a sad expression, briefly replied so as she treated Julis coldly.

Julis ruefully bit her lips for only an instant, but she immediately turned a piercing gaze at Orphelia.

“My business is the same as one year ago. Come back, Orphelia. The world where you should be isn't there.”

“...Stop it, Julis. I'm just following my fate. You cannot overturn it.”

Orphelia feebly shook her head and clearly showed a will of refusal.

“I won’t admit it!”

Julis’ voice seemed almost like she shouted.

“.....”

When Orphelia cast down her eyes, she touched the school badge on her chest with her hand.

“My fate is right here now. If you want to make me abide at any cost——”

“Yes, I understand! But it won’t go like one year ago!”

At the same time as Julis said that, mana swirled.

“W-Wait, Julis!”

“Ayato, don’t interfere with this! This is a problem between me and Orphelia!”

Julis shouted without looking back at him.

Ayato who felt a strong determination in her voice could not help but stop his foot which was about to step forward.

“Your school badge, I’ll smash it this time for sure!”

Heat waves swirled around Julis and fiery chakrams manifested

“Bloom proudly — Great Crimson Heart ^{Anthurium} Blazing Shield!”

When Julis shook her arm, nearly twenty chakrams were released towards Orphelia.

But, the chakrams which made up the vanguard nose-dive just before Orphelia and scooped out the ground.

The scorching chakrams instantly melted the snow, and steam and snowflakes soared.

It might just be a mere smokescreen, but it was enough to cut off her line of sight even for a moment.

At that opportunity, the chakrams parted left and right and assaulted Orphelia as they surrounded her.

(Good...!)

It was a perfect combination be it range or timing.

At least, it should be enough as a first move to seize the initiative.

But——

“——!”

At that moment, Ayato felt a shiver run down his spine.

On the other side of the white screen, an incredibly powerful prana swelled up.

That amount was no joke. Ayato himself had confidence in the amount of his prana, but it could not even compare to that of the girl before him. It seemed to be gushing forth immeasurably... or rather endlessly.

Prana overwhelming to the extent that it could not be estimated — and very ominous.

An amount of mana, which could not be compared with that of when Julis activated her ability, raged and blew off the spray of snow in an instant. The air shook and a ferocious overpowering feeling as if twisting and squashing everything was released.

There, the figure of Orphelia calmly standing and countless arms which rose like smoke at her feet wriggled like that of the dead. Those poisonous-looking blackish brown arms flickeringly waved like a heat haze and they looked not like solid, but gases.

Those arms blocked and caught all the chakrams released by Julis. The chakrams strengthened their rotation as they struggled so as to somehow break loose from the arms, but the blades of flame slipped through the dead's arms like smoke.

Despite this, the claw-like hands still firmly seized the chakrams

“So that’s Orphelia Landlufen’s ability...”

Naturally, Ayato had also heard about it.

The ability of the <Venomous ^{Ereshkigal} Witch> said to be the strongest — it was the power to manipulate poisonous smoke called miasma .

“...Ah, Julis. It’s no use. As expected, it’s impossible for you.”

Immediately after Orphelia muttered in a voice filled with sorrow, the chakrams were easily crushed.

There, Ayato finally understood the feeling from earlier.

That was a warning.

Ayato’s instincts judged this girl to be dangerous. Probably something like that.

Although at this late hour, he remembered the words that Helga said before.

『——She’s an existence different from us.

He thought that it was metaphorical, but that’s wrong. It was a plain fact.

Certainly, the power of the girl before him clearly surpassed the human realm. By just confronting her, he keenly understood it. He was made to understand it instinctively.

——However.

“I’m not done yet!”

Julis moved as if she anticipated this.

(Julis...!)

An overpowering feeling by which even Ayato froze for an instant. To Julis who set an attack in defiance of it, Ayato was surprised, yet in admiration.

Judging from Julis’ tone, the two of them seemed to have also fought before. In other words, Julis probably knew Orphelia’s power. That’s why even after being showed such overwhelming power, she continued to challenge Orphelia without flinching.

But generally, it would be the opposite. Not having your heart broken even after experiencing this much overwhelming power was impossible unless you possessed a very strong mental strength.

(Or... is there something that she can’t yield to the point of going that far?)

It was probably the latter.

“Bloom proudly ——^{Anemone Coronaria[9]}Blazing Sunflower!”



As Julis put up both her hands right overhead, a large flame flower opened its bud.

That flower of anemone which emitted a dazzling light illuminated the snowfield of midwinter like a small sun. It was to the extent that a burning heat reached even where Ayato who took some distance was. This was a technique that Ayato was seeing for the first time, but it was quite a bold move.

“Take this, Orphelia!”

When Julis swung down her arms with a shout, the large flame flower fell towards Orphelia.

But even so Orphelia, without changing her complexion, just quietly raised her right arm.

“Eh...?”

The next moment, Ayato doubted his own eyes.

From Orphelia’s action, Ayato thought that she’d activated some sort of defensive ability, but —— of all things, Orphelia stopped Julis’ technique barehanded.

The glove of her right hand flared up, immediately turned into charcoal and disappeared into the wind.

Even so, there was not even a trace of burns on the right hand of Orphelia who stopped the huge mass of flames.

“No way... are you telling me that she stopped it only with her prana...?”

It would certainly be possible in theory if one invested prana to local defense.

However, defense in prana basically reduced damage to some extent and it was impossible to completely stop an attack. By doing something like that, prana would probably dry up immediately. And if one was to block a technique of this scale, then all the more so.

However — one could see no signs of Orphelia’s prana being dried up at all.

“Impossible...”

Julis opened wide her eyes in disbelief.

“...Your fate is weak... That’s why I told you.”

As soon as Orphelia listlessly frowned and clenched her right arm, the large flame flower burst as it exploded and vanished like mist.

Moreover, miasma blew up from around Orphelia and formed a huge arm which absorbed the countless arms which were wriggling so far and soared to the sky.

“——Turn to dust.”

As Orphelia muttered, that blackish brown arm swiftly ran through the snowfield like a snake crawling on the ground and caught up with Julis.

“Kuaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Julis raised a painful scream, but the arm which grabbed her raised her until about ten meters high and then mercilessly flung her against the ground.

“Julis!”

Although Ayato ran off and caught her body at the last second, he was blown about ten meters away on the snowfield with Julis due to the strong impact.

“Julis, are you okay!?”

Ayato immediately got up and lifted Julis in his arms.

“Ugh...”

Julis seemed to have already lost consciousness.

On a closer look, corrosion-like traces from being grabbed remained on her uniform and her complexion was awfully bad, too.

(This is the <Venomous^{Ereshkigal} Witch>’s miasma...)

Rumors said that its poisonous nature would undermine others just by touching it, but it seemed to be true without any exaggeration.

“...Are you Amagiri Ayato?”

As if having noticed Ayato for the first time, Orphelia looked at him with cold eyes, not even showing one ounce of interest to him.

“It’s already settled, right? It’s true that it’s Julis who suddenly challenged you, but any more would be——”

Before Ayato finished his sentence, miasma blew up around Orphelia —— no, from her body. She lost her glove (because one glove was already burned away by Julis) and one could see that miasma rose as it swayed from her exposed white skin.

“It is sad, but even I cannot stop a fate which has already begun to move... If you do not want to be rolled up, too, you should leave.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t do that.”

While holding Julis, Ayato activated <Ser-Versta>.

“...It’s a shame.”

As soon as Orphelia said so with a sad expression, the countless arms formed by the miasma attacked Ayato and Julis.

“Amagiri Bright Dragon Style Intermediate Sword Technique
—— <Arrow Clearing Crow>”

However, they were all bisected before reaching Ayato and Julis and disappeared into the void.

Just a little, Orphelia’s eyebrows twitched.

“Ah, that is <Ser-Versta>...”

Orphelia’s miasma probably could not be dealt with using an ordinary weapon, but if it was this ogre lux which burnt all things, then it was another story.

If Orphelia was to draw back with this, then there would be no problem.

But in case that that wasn’t so, he might be forced to a bout.

(Honestly, I don’t feel like being able to win at all.)

While holding Julis in his left and setting up <Ser-Versta> in his right hand, he gradually took distance.

Fortunately, Orphelia showed neither signs of moving nor the attitude to set something.

At the time when Ayato began to hold such a naïve thought like “at this rate, I might succeed in escaping”——

“Eh...?”

Ayato's feet suddenly grew weak.

His hand holding <Ser-Versta> trembled and he choked as if something was clogged in his throat.

“Don’t tell me...!?”

“.....”

When Ayato explored the surroundings with the state of “cognition”, the flow of air was clearly unnatural.

Probably, Orphelia would have already set up miasma around.

“Hahaha... I would say it's something like tasteless, odorless, colorless and transparent poison gas....That's really crazy.”

Only dry laughter could still come out, but if Orphelia could manipulate miasma at will, doing at least that would not be strange.

“——I am sorry. But, you will soon feel at ease.”

The arms of miasma were raised in order to smash up Ayato and Julis.

He could still barely move his body, but at this rate, it would be just a matter of time before he is caught.

Even so, he could not give up. As he tightly grasped <Ser-Versta> again, he somehow waited for an opening.

At that moment.

“Can you wait a little, young lady?”

An out-of-place, cheerful voice resounded on the snowfield.

- -

On a closer look, yesterday’s gentleman ——Gustave was standing on the snowfield with a smiling face.

“Actually, I was requested to dispose of these people. There is a bonus for each head, you know? Therefore, if you like, would you please hand these preys over to me?”

Orphelia looked at Gustave with uninterested eyes as expected.

“...And you are?”

“I am called Gustave Malraux.”

“Never heard of you.”

Though Orphelia curtly said so, a space window suddenly opened in front of her.

『——Hey, Orphelia. You bastard, where the hell did you go? I told you many times not to come out of the research institute, right?』

It was only voice communication, but that voice was familiar.

It was Le Wolfe Black Institute Student Council President Dirk Eberwein.

“...I’ll be right back.”

At the same time as Orphelia replied so, the ominous overpowering feeling disappeared from the surroundings. And as she turned her gaze at Gustave, she said with a sigh.

“Suit yourself”

“I am grateful.”

Gustave took off his hat and respectfully bowed.

On the other hand, Orphelia remained silent and turned her back on Ayato as if nothing had happened. And just like that, she returned to the car without looking back.

“Dear me, I really got cold feet. I have heard the rumors, but to think that she was such a monster... scary, scary.”

Gustave who saw off Orphelia shrugged his shoulders as he jested.

“Now then, I guess I shall settle my business.”

As Gustave said so smilingly, magic squares appeared one by one on both his sides. Like last night, mana accumulated; a huge double-headed dog slowly crept out from the right magic square and a three-headed dog from the left magic square.

They were about one size smaller than yesterday’s chimera.

However, the strength of the mana felt from their bodies was far greater.

“Let me introduce them. They are my masterpieces, Orthrus^[10] and Cerberus. How do you find them? Aren’t they majestic figures like those transmitted in the myth? My dear watchdogs which once turned all the stalwarts of the Star Hunter Guard into a bloodbath... well, still they were no match for the Guard Captain though.”

Gustave who talked as if seeming disappointed did not break his smile.

“Even so, I gradually improved them very much since then and it will be more than enough to hunt wounded prey.”

“Kuh...!”

While Ayato adopted a cautious stance, he kept a close eye on the surroundings looking for any chance to escape from this situation. Although Orphelia’s ability was cancelled, the damage due to the poison still remained. Though not very much, it was not

a condition where he could satisfactorily fight. Moreover, if he were to fight while protecting Julis, it would be simply impossible.

But, the two-headed magic beast was moving in a circle around Ayato looking for an opening while baring its sharp teeth.

(It's really bad...)

These magic beasts seemed to be tougher than he thought.

It would be all right if it was just one beast, but fighting two beasts simultaneously would be quite difficult for the current Ayato.

Being able to use <Ser-Versta> unlike yesterday was at least a saving grace, but it was questionable about how long he could hold. After all, even maintaining this ogre lux was the utmost that the current Ayato could do.

“Gurururururururu...!”

The three-headed magic beast — Cerberus, while raising a low growl, bent over as to check for openings. It was a posture in which it could attack at any time, but the next moment, the other magic beast leaped from behind it.

A simple feint — but even though Ayato understood it, his body could not follow.

“Guh...!”

Its arm which was moved down as it tore the wind sent Ayato along with Julis, whom he held, flying.

The shock was tremendous and perhaps because there was also the effect of the poison, he almost fainted.

The double-headed magic beast —— Orthrus once again engaged in pursuit further aiming at Ayato rolling on the snowfield like a rubber ball. Its huge jaw which could swallow whole a person approached Ayato, but the latter, measuring the timing, took a defensive position and rebuilt his stance. Then, rather than dodging its sharp fangs, he took one step forward aiming at its mouth.

“Amagiri Bright Dragon Style First Sword Fighting Skill —— “Mont Fuji”!”

He rounded his body and while putting his weight, swung down <Ser-Versta> with all his might.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

That blow bisected the two-headed magic beast which raised a scream of death throes.

“Hou. As expected of the <Phoenix> champ, you’re good. However...”

To the words of Gustave clapping his hands while nodding, Ayato turned his gaze around.

At this instant, the fangs of Cerberus, who sneaked around directly horizontally, were approaching in front of Ayato.

(I can't... dodge this!)

The moment he was about to thrust away his body in order to protect at least Julis.

“_____”

At that moment, a sharp sword flash ran cutting the space itself and all three heads of the beast which bared its fangs were flying about in the air.

Its large build fell down making the ground rumble and the piled up snow soared.

In the middle of that, shining golden hair glittered.

“I am sorry to have kept you waiting, Ayato. I made it in the nick of time.”

“Claudia...!”

The body of the relieved Ayato rapidly lost strength and he weakly sat.

On a closer look, in Claudia's hands a pair of demon swords —<Pan-Dora> was tightly grasped. The eyeball design put in the handle felt as though it was goggling at Ayato.

“Oh dear, this is a problem. An unexpected obstacle appeared.”

Impatience appeared just a little on the face of Gustave who did not break his smile so far.

“What will you do now, Gustave Malraux? I don’t mind being your opponent as is, but... it’s not the case for you, right?”

“...I see, what an unpleasantly shrewd young lady.”

Gustave confronted Claudia silently for a while, but he greatly sighed before long and shook his head.

“Haa... You’re right. I was certainly told not to lay a hand on you. Though it is a rare chance, I shall reasonably withdraw here.”

“It’s a wise decision.”

Contrastive to Claudia who chuckled, Gustave disappeared within the forest with a bitter face.

“Haa... You saved us, Claudia.”

“No, I’m glad that I made it in time. I already contacted the royal palace, so I think they will soon come to get us.”

“I see...”

At the same time as he muttered so, Ayato’s field of vision became blurred. And his consciousness rapidly faded away.

“Ayato? Are you all right, Ayato...?!”

While hearing Claudia's cries, Ayato's consciousness was sinking into deep darkness.

- -

That greenhouse had already lost its function as a greenhouse long ago. The glass was cracked here and there, full of repaired marks and generally, it undeniably gave the impression of an old deserted house.

But still, in this country where the winter cold was severe, having been isolated from the open air meant that it probably had some level of benefit. The plants which grew as to fill up the greenhouse all retained a fresh green and among them, there were those which bloomed pretty flowers.

Inside it, a girl with rose-colored hair was only gazing absentmindedly at the girl with chestnut-colored hair who endeavored in gardening without getting tired.

"...I don't understand after all. How is it fun making such a thing?"

At these words, the chestnut-haired girl shrugged her shoulders with a chuckle.

"Hmm... Well, if I have to say, it would be the actual experiences, I guess."

“Actual experiences?”

“Yes. The experiences of coming to touch with a life.”

“I think that facing these runts would be more than enough for that.”

Although both of them were still children, too, there were many children younger than them in this orphanage.

“Fufufu, it’s not the same. These children^[11] cannot talk, but in return they are very honest. When poured with affection, they will properly return it; conversely if you ease up on them, they will ignore you.”

“Plants? Ignore people?”

The rose-color haired girl made a face showing that she could not understand after all.

“Oh my, don’t you know? Even healthy plants will wither if they don’t receive affection from people.”

“...I didn’t know that.”

Although the rose color-haired girl noncommittally said, still she did not intend to leave the greenhouse.

For some reason, it was very comfortable here.

Though it was so old, small and ragged, she strangely felt at ease.

The roseate-haired girl somehow realized that the reason was the warm girl before her eyes.

“Hey, it’s boring to be always looking, right? Why don’t you try to help me occasionally, too?”

“...You mean me?”

“Is there anyone else here? Come, take this.”

The roseate-haired girl revealed a perplexed expression at the girl who peremptorily handed her a small shovel.

“I-I’ve never taken care of plants before...”

“Oh my... You really don’t know anything after all. Fine, I will teach you from scratch.”

Saying so, the chestnut-haired girl happily laughed.

It was a calm, gentle — warm smile as she seemed to be really enjoying herself.

- -

—His body was awfully heavy.

A feeling of pressure as if was being crushed by something.

As he opened his eyes to this unbearable suffocation, a dim room's ceiling came into view.

Though confused for a moment, he immediately remembered.

This was Lieseltania's royal palace, in the room which was assigned to him.

"I see... I fainted after that..."

That meant, this weight on his body was probably due to Orphelia's poison which was still effective after all.

He realized it as he tried to raise his body to confirm it when thinking so.

"N-Ngh..."

"Suh..."

On top of Ayato's body, Saya and Kirin were soundly sleeping lying on him.

As might be expected of a room for an honor guest, the bed was also big, so there was still quite some space even if three people

slept on it. Then, Saya brought her face near Ayato's arm and Kirin hers near Ayato's feet, both of them raising a quiet sleeper's breathing.

"Errr..."

As he was unable to completely grasp the situation and was wondering what he should do, the room's door opened and someone came in.

"Ah, did you wake up? Honestly, don't make me worry so much."

That face, which was shadowed as the corridor was bright, could not clearly be seen; but he knew who it was by the voice.

"Hahaha... I'm ashamed. More importantly Julis, are you all right, too?"

"No problem. I woke up earlier than you."

While saying so, Julis sat down on a chair beside the bed.

"How long do you think has passed before you woke up?"

"Eh? No, I don't know at all..."

As he honestly answered back since he did not know, Julis said with a mischievous smile.

"Three days."

“Three days!?”

As expected, he was surprised at this.

“Orphelia’s poison is assorted, but the one you received this time acts on prana and it forcibly put one in the same state as when they run out of prana. Though it isn’t life-threatening, the troublesome thing is that the more aggregate amount of prana you have, the stronger the effect becomes. That’s why it would especially take time for you to recover.”

“Is that so...”

“These two were so worried that they constantly attended to you every day. You should thank them later.”

When Julis said so, she looked at Saya and Kirin with gentle eyes.

“And... I haven’t given you my thanks yet, too.”

“Thanks?”

“I heard the story from Claudia. Didn’t even Gustave showed up after Orphelia? Thank you, you saved me.”

“Ah, you mean that, huh.”

Though it was certainly true, he did what he thought was natural. Probably, if their positions were reversed, Julis would have done the same thing. They had already established such deep trust.

“It’s fine now. I hope you won’t start talking about favors or debts again.”^[12]

Then, Julis calmly smiled and shook her head.

“No... I just wanted to say it properly.”

“I see.”

Though Ayato also returned a smile to such a Julis, he immediately returned to a serious look and asked.

“So, would you tell me, Julis? The relation between you and her —Orphelia Landlufen.”

“...That’s right. Now that this happened, you also have the right to know.”

Julis seemed to have faltered for an instant, but she soon took out a handkerchief from her breast pocket.

“Ayato, do you remember this?”

“Of course. It’s the handkerchief from when you and I met for the first time, right?”

The handkerchief which had been carried by the wind and fell before Ayato who has just arrived at Seidoukan Academy. The time when Ayato handed it to Julis was their encounter.

He felt like already it was something of quite long ago, but actually only about half a year has passed since then.

“Yes, that’s right. And I think I talked about it a little before, but this was given to me by everyone from the orphanage as a present.”

“If I remember correctly, you said they embroidered it together. And that among them, Julis’ close friend sewed it...”

Saying up to there, Ayato suddenly realized.

“Ah...! Don’t tell me...!”

“——Yes. That close friend is Orphelia.”

With nostalgic eyes, Julis traced the most unshapely embroidery with a finger.

“Then, she was also in that orphanage before?”

As Julis gave a small nod, she stood up, went towards the window and opened the luxurious curtains.

He didn’t know what time it was now, but the soft moonlight came in through the slightly cloudy sky.

“But, if she’s your best friend, why did she do such a thing...?”

As he remembered the fight between Julis and Orphelia, Ayato cast down his gaze.

Even friends would quarrel, but that was beyond that level.

“After I started going to the orphanage to play, Orphelia and I immediately got along well. After all, we almost had the same age and above all, even though our personalities were the exact opposite, we got along quite well. She was a gentle girl who couldn’t even kill an insect and she liked taking care of plants more than anything... When a beautiful flower blooms, only then was she a little excited.”

Orphelia’s character sketch which Julis talked about seemed totally different from the one Ayato saw.

“But one day, Orphelia’s figure suddenly disappeared from the orphanage. Even when I asked the Sisters, they would hold their tongues not telling me anything. So, I clung on to my big brother and had him investigated, and finally understood. About the fact that the orphanage’s management came to a deadlock, the huge debt, and——about the fact that as mortgage, Orphelia was half forcibly levied to a certain research institution. And the worst of this was that I knew nothing till then. I was a child who really knew nothing whether it be this country’s state or its system or even what kind of position I’m in.”

“.....”

“Naturally, in order to take back Orphelia, the child me tried any means possible. But as a result, I only realized how powerless I was. Eventually, there is no one in this country that can oppose a research institution under the direct control of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation.”

Julis closed her mouth once there.

Silence ruled the room for a while.

Ayato too, just keeping silent, endured the heavy silence.

“——Having levied Orphelia was a research institution of Frauenlob. That research institute is the abandoned building which is in that snowfield.”

“That place is...?”

“Their research subject was... to create Starpulse generation posteriori.”

“Wha...?!”

Ayato unintentionally raised his voice. He had never heard about such crazy research.

“The person in charge of the research was a woman called <^{Magnus Opus} Great Doctor>, a student belonging to Allekant’s researchers.”

“I see; that’s why you don’t like Allekant...”

“You may say that it’s a personal grudge.”

He finally understood the reason why Julis hated Allekant.

Julis slowly took out her portable terminal and opened a space window.

There was a photo of two still innocent and intimate girls. One was a strong-willed girl with gorgeous rose-colored hair, and the other was a calm girl with chestnut-colored hair.

“This is me and Orphelia.”

“No way...”

He understood at first glance that one seemed to be Julis, but it might be said that Orphelia was a completely different person from the color of her hair and eyes, and her atmosphere to her look .

“Orphelia at the time was not a <Starpulse Generation> much less a <Strega>. It’s really disconcerting that now she is the world’s strongest <Strega>.”

In other words, that meant that Orphelia was a <Strega> made artificially.

“Then, does this mean that the research succeeded?”

“Who knows? But if it was the case, then it’d be a great discovery of the century. And it should have been widely publicized. The fact that they didn’t do that means that there is some problem. ——Like Orphelia.”

“Problem?”

Julis shrugged her shoulders with a sorrowful smile.

“You saw that abandoned building, right? That’s the result of Orphelia’s power having run out of control. The building fell to ruins, the ground rotted and grass doesn’t grow there even now.”

“Run out control...? Why did such a thing happen?”

“I don’t know the details. What I only know is that when the research center was destroyed, it was Solneige’s Special Forces who rescued Orphelia. Afterwards, I don’t know what kind of deal there was, but Orphelia was transferred from Frauenlob to Solneige.”

“I see, that’s why she is now in Le Wolfe...”

Solneige was Le Wolfe Black Institute’s governing body.

“Although, it was quite later on that I knew of these details. At the time, the research center’s destruction did not go public as it was concealed, and I wasn’t able to find even a clue about where and how Orphelia was.—Until I watched the <Lindvolus> that day.”

“You mean the <Lindvolus> of the time before last, right?”

Julis nodded at Ayato’s words.

“As expected, I doubted my own eyes. But no matter how much her appearance changed, my intuition told me that that was Orphelia. So, I tried to contact her, but...”

Julis’ voice faded weakly. With that alone, one could guess in what it resulted in.

“She has changed. It might have been inevitable, but it looks as if she gave up and abandoned just about everything. But... even so, I want Orphelia to come back. As things go, though not that serious, Orphelia’s body won’t last.”

Julis strongly chewed her molars.

“What do you mean by her body won’t last?”

“I’m also a <Strega>, so I know. I don’t think it possible to completely control such mighty power. Orphelia’s miasma is nothing but a double-edged sword which also undermines herself the more she uses it. She’s virtually fights while reducing her lifespan.”

Certainly, it was unthinkable that one could handle such overwhelming power with no risk.

“That’s why one year ago, as soon as I was admitted into Asterisk, I find out about Orphelia and went to persuade her. To at least stop anymore absurd fights. But eventually, she didn’t heed; and I’d told her to win a duel against me if she wants to continue no matter what... The result was, well... I don’t need to say it.”

So, that was the circumstances of a year ago, huh.

“It was a little long, but well it’s something like this.”

When Julis sighed as she said so, she put a hand on her waist with a somewhat refreshed face.

“Therefore Ayato, this is only a problem between me and Orphelia. I’m sorry to have involved you this time, but I must accomplish just this much by myself. Otherwise, neither Orphelia nor I would be able accept the outcome. Do you understand?”

“...I got it.”

To be frank, he wanted to help her, but everyone has a fight which they can’t compromise on no matter what.

“That’s it. Even you two there who are feigning sleep, I don’t want unnecessary interference about this matter.”

When Julis teasingly said so, Saya’s and Kirin’s bodies slightly moved.

“...So, you’ve noticed it.”

“Ha-Hahaha... I’m sorry.”

The two girls looked up apologetically.

“Oh, so you two were awake.”

That said, it was natural after they talked so much.

“Um, we didn’t mean to eavesdrop; how to put it, we couldn’t help it...”

“I don’t mind, so don’t worry about it. More importantly now, we’ve to give priority to Gustave Malraux over Orphelia.”

“By any chance, has anyone been attacked again since then?”

In that case, Ayato thought that it wasn’t the time to be leisurely sleeping like that.

“No, on that point, it’s all right. The guard staff largely increased in both the royal palace and the imperial villa, and the standby alert is set in the whole capital. Even that guy can’t take action at a moment’s notice. Just in case, I also took necessary measures so that a part of the guards’ staff might be dispatched to the orphanage, too.”

Because there was the incident with Flora, Julis was probably anxious, too.

“Besides, if he carelessly attacks, the Integrated Enterprise Foundation won’t just sit back, too. My brother should have already contacted them, but a certain number of soldiers are stationed in the research facility in the capital’s suburbs. Should war begin aside, it’s enough to deal with one criminal.”

“It’d be better if he’d just quietly withdraw though...”

Kirin said so and snuggled Senbakiri.

“...That’s probably impossible.”

“That’s right. Once we return to Asterisk, it’ll become extremely difficult for that guy to attack us—— in other words, to achieve his

goal. Not only will it be difficult to just get into Asterisk, even in the case that he succeeded in doing it, it'll be impossible to get away to begin with. Therefore, he'll definitely attack before that."

"Then, he's likely to aim for when we'll be on our way back, I guess..."

If they were attacked somewhere on that mountain path, it would be quite troublesome.

"——Ah, that's right. By the way, where is Claudia?"

There, Ayato remembered that there was something he wanted to ask Claudia.

Although vague, Ayato remembered the conversation between Claudia and Gustave. The way it looked, Claudia was more likely to have some kind of information regarding this matter.

"Ah, Claudia went back earlier."

"Eh?"

"She said that there was some place where she must stop by. She seemed to be unusually in a hurry though."

"Is that so..."

It looked like she did not tell about her conversation with Gustave to Julis and the others.

(Anyway, I'll contact her later...)

It's Claudia we're talking about, so he thought that she had some plan; but he also wanted to ask her about that.

There suddenly, Ayato's stomach greatly rumbled.

"Ah..."

Although it couldn't helped since he had slept for three days, as expected it was a little embarrassing.

After Saya, Kirin and Julis looked at each other, they burst into laughter all at once.

"Puh, Hahahaha...! Good grief... Well, it's good to be healthy. I will ask to prepare some light meal. Wait a moment."

At the time when Julis wiped tears which floated on the edge of her eyes and stood up——

"I-I-I-It's terrible! Princess!"

Flora who barged into the room with the vigor as to blow off the door shouted while being flurried.

Chapter 6 –The Demonic Dragon Subjugation

“What’s the matter, Flora? Didn’t you return to the orphanage?”

Julis tightened her face and calmed down Flora as she bent down so as to match her gaze.

“Y-Yes! I intended to do so, but something terrible happened in the city...!”

“Something terrible, you say?”

“Um, many lizard-like things huge like this are flying in the air, so I was scared and came back.”

While jumping quickly in a bouncing way, Flora spread both her arms as to describe their size.

They didn’t know to what extent it deviated from the actual size , but it was probably about the same as that of a human adult.

“The city is already in a panic state and vehicles aren’t moving at all, either.”

“No way, are those things attacking people?”

“N-No, it did not go up to there yet...”

“Hmm... All right, Flora. You wait for a while in this villa. It’s safe here.”

After Julis kindly said so, she turned her gaze to Ayato and the others.

“If I go see my brother, I’ll probably be able to get information about the situation. I’ll head out to the royal palace. Depending on the situation, I may go out for a little, but...”

“In that case, I will come too. I’ll change my clothes, so can you wait just a little?”

As Ayato got up from the bed, he strongly stretched his body. The prana’s flow was back to normal and there were no pain or physical unease in particular, either.

“Ah! Then, I’ll prepare the change of clothes!”

Flora hurriedly prepared clothes.

“No, but you’re still...”

“My body is already fine. More importantly, from what I hear, it looks like it’s Gustave’s doing and if so, we aren’t unrelated, either.—Saya, Kirin-chan, what will you do?”

As Ayato asked so while wearing his clothes, the two girls nodded immediately.

“I’ll go too.”

“Me too.”

Julis who heard that wryly smiled with a face expressing that it could not be helped.

“I got it. Then prepare yourselves quickly.”

Even if she did not say that, they quickly completed their preparations; and the four people immediately headed to the royal palace.

When they arrived at Jolbert’s room, a group of people with tense looks came out as if changing places with Ayato and company. They were anxious as one among them, a past middle-aged man who noticed Julis, had a really difficult expression, but the group of people left the royal palace at a quick pace as it is.

“——Oh, it’s you guys, huh.”

Whether he was sleeping or awake, Jolbert looked somewhat sleepy.

“You came to hear about the commotion in the city, right? Then, you came at a good timing. I’ve just received a report.”

“How is the situation?”

“It seems that strong creatures about one meter long suddenly appeared in the city center. Their numbers are unknown, but there seems to be at least a dozen of them. Looks like they are lizards with wings —— well, if I’ve to say, it’d be dragons, I guess.”

As Julis asked briefly, Jolbert answered while suppressing a yawn as if bored.

“I’ve also contacted Solneige and Frauenlob, but they’re really dull to react. It’s doubtful whether they’ll move their troops. Fortunately at present, they don’t seem to attack people and it’s to the extent that even our police force can deal with, so they might have concluded that it isn’t that much a threat. Really, it’s awful.”

Jolbert ruefully complained.

“However, we can’t possibly ignore it. After all, there are a lot of them, so the police mobilized its entire staff to deal with them.”

“...Its entire staff, you say?”

But there, Julis knitted her eyebrows.

“In other words, do you mean that even those who were deployed in preparation for Gustave Malraux’s attack?”

“Yes. After all no matter how you think about it, this is his doing, right? It’s precisely in preparation for such a time that they were deployed, so isn’t it natural? Ah, of course I properly asked to leave necessary personnel in the main facilities including this royal palace, so you can rest assured about that...”

“——I see, so that’s it.”

Without hearing Jolbert’s words until the end, Julis clicked her tongue in vexation.

“This is probably a diversion.”

“A diversion? But in that case, there are many other ways to do it...”

For the moment, it didn’t seem to be a situation serious enough that Ayato and company had to expressly come out, but Julis closed her eyes and shook her head.

“Even if I say diversion, it isn’t to lead us out. It’s so to speak a decoy in order to gather people beside us. If we fall into this trap and gather the personnel into the city center, other parts of the city will inevitably become short-handed.”

“That’s also strange. Just now, Julis’ brother said that he has properly left necessary personnel in the main places——”

The eyes of Saya who spoke with a dubious face opened wide as she was talking.

“...No way.”

“Right. In the main facilities, that is.”

Julis spat out with disgust.

“Answer me, Big Brother. The people who were here just now had come to talk about that, right?”

“...Oh boy, you got me.”

Jolbert exaggeratedly shrugged his shoulders and looked up at the sky.

“That’s quite an insight, my dear sister. As I also said just now, we seem to be short-handed you see. They were saying to have the guards withdraw in unnecessary places and invest them to deal with the situation. —As a matter of course, the slums were the places whose names were raised at the very beginning. They originally disliked the fact that guards were dispatched to those places (slums).”

“...Did you approve it, Big Brother?”

“What else could I have done? In the first place, it isn’t as if they were completely wrong. It’s still all right now, but you can’t omit the case where the dragons may suddenly begin to attack people. If they aren’t quickly dealt with, it might become something serious.”

“But, that’s...!”

“Besides, Julis, even I want to protect Flora and I also feel that I want to do something for the orphanage you like. But even so, my order of priority doesn’t change. After all, the most important person for me is you.”

Jolbert stared straight at Julis and told that as to admonish her.

“Can you please consider my feelings and stay here quietly?”

“——I refuse!”

But this time too, Julis flatly declared that and left the room.

When Ayato and company rushed after her afterwards, Julis flung her fist against the wall of the corridor.

Her face was dyed in anger, mana around her rustled disquietingly.

“Julis, calm down.”

“...I’m fine.”

As Julis greatly took a deep breath once, she smoothed her hair upward and turned around to Ayato and company.

“Gustave has moved assuming that we will notice this diversion. In other words, he should be waiting at the slums. Even so, I have to go. There are the Sisters in the orphanage, but naturally, they aren’t flawless... I’ll tell you just in case, but you don’t particularly need to come along with me.”

“What are you saying now?”

Ayato said with a wry smile, and Saya and Kirin nodded as they agreed with him.

“...We’re also related to this, this time.”

“That’s right. It isn’t only Julis-senpai who is targeted.”

Julis smiled wryly to their words, but she immediately tightened her face.

“——Then, I have a plan. Could you move per my instructions?”

- -

The night wind going across the lake was especially cold.

Besides, if one flew at a fierce speed as to cut that wind, all the more so.

“I see, so this is the shortcut... no wonder you arrived early that time.”

Flapping wings of flames made with Julis’ ability, Ayato was flying just barely above the lake’s surface.

“T-This is to the bitter end one of the shortcuts. Until I was able to master this technique, I was using a different route. After all under the present conditions, this method is definitely the fastest to arrive at the orphanage.”

Julis, in a posture where she was held by Ayato, muttered in a small voice.

“Julis? What’s the matter?”

“N-No, it’s nothing! I mean, your face is too close!”

As her face turned bright red, Julis forcefully pushed Ayato's face away.

"S-Sorry."

"...W-Well, never mind. Anyway, like this we can cross the lake in less than 5 minutes. Let's do this first."

The big moon was flickeringly swaying on the slightly swelling lake surface.

When turning their eyes to the east, the dazzling night view of the town center appeared.

On the other hand, it was needless to compare it with the lights in the slums' whole area, which spread out on the opposite shore in the front, as they were few.

"——I see it, over there is the orphanage."

When looking ahead of where Julis pointed at, certainly a tall church-like silhouette dimly appeared in the darkness.

"...Hmm?"

But, just before it —— there is an unpleasant scenery of a concrete structured river dike on the lake shore of the slums, but one man was standing there waiting for Ayato and Julis.

"Well, well, you arrived faster than I expected."

"Gustave Malraux...!"

You could see that Julis bit her molars.

“I had no doubt in my mind that you would come”

“I hope you didn’t lay your hands on the orphanage.”

Calmly receiving Julis’ shooting-like gaze, Gustave lightly laughed.

“Please, rest at ease. Frankly speaking, it isn’t as if I didn’t think about that, but there is a slightly tough one blended with the Sisters over there you see. I have no other choice than to settle this as a side job.”

“Humph..., then it’s fine.”

Julis who snorted slowly landed with Ayato.

The distance from Gustave was approximately five meters. It was a distance as to enter into Ayato’s range by stepping forward a little more.

“As for me, it’s enough as long as you people can come out. My Dora-Colchis’s, which I send to play in the city center, are harmless as they don’t indiscriminately attack people. After all, there are staffs of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation there, so it’ll be troublesome afterwards if I were to carelessly hurt them.”

“...You’re quite talkative, Gustave Malraux. And while we’re at it, I don’t mind even if you also spit out the name of the one who requested such a foolish thing.”

Mana swirled around Julis.

Ayato too activated <Ser-Versta> and lowered his waist.

“No, no, I may look like this, but I’m a pro, if not much of one. So, you shall pardon me for not revealing only that. However——”

Gustave opened his arms with an exaggerated gesture without being shaken.

At the same time, a huge magic square never seen so far appeared in the lake. Its diameter was around 30 meters.

“In exchange, I shall introduce you to my best masterpiece.”

The magic square emitted light and snake heads emerged out of the lake’s surface like tentacles.

The number —— there were nine in total.

“Wha...!?”

To the figure which slowly rose from underwater... No, to its size, both Ayato and Julis couldn’t help being lost for words.

It wasn't an exaggeration to liken that monster, which grew nine snake heads from its body like that of a four-legged dinosaur, to a small hill. The lower half of its body was still in the lake, but as for its length, only its trunk was 20 meter; if you include from the point of its head to its tail, it might exceed 40 meters (of length).

As expected, it somewhat resembled the dragon which Ayato and Kirin fought in the underground ballast area before, but the size was incomparable to the one of before. Just looking at first glance, it was easily around more than double (of the one before) in size.

Its eyes which fierily shone were eerily red and its mouth where sharp fangs lined up in a row was likely to swallow whole a car let alone a person in one gulp.

“This is, a Hydra^[13]...?!”

“That is indeed correct, Your Highness.”

To Julis who squeezed out her voice, Gustave nodded with an extremely joyful face.

“Don’t you agree that it’s the same as the one described in the myth... no, it’s a more heroic, and dignified figure than the mythical Hydra, right? It’s the ultimate magic beast which I spent three years to create.”

“Guoooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooh!”

The nine heads simultaneously raised roars which rattlingly shook the air.

Perhaps noticing the unusual phenomenon with that, the slums which were ruled by a gloomy stillness similar to dead suddenly became noisy, screams and angry voices resounded from here and there.

“Kuh...! But are you sure you want to do this? If such a monster was to run wild, the army might take action.”

In fact, it could already be regarded as a big monster.

Thinking normally, the army deploying was highly probable.

“Well, I wonder about that”

However, Gustave laughed as he was fully composed.

“Due to my intruding of the royal palace the other day, Solneige and Frauenlob should’ve already understood that this is my doing. Naturally, my purpose will have definitely been revealed.”

“——!”

Gustave rumbled his throat with a simmering sound.

“When considering the <Gryps>, you people’s existence is probably troublesome even for them. Of course, if this Hydra was to attack the town areas, they would have no choice but to take action... But, if the place is this slum, then it’s another story. An abandoned land and the abandoned people who live there. I think that the Integrated Enterprise Foundation’s resilience is fairly strong.”

“.....”

Julis kept silent as is and only bit her lips.

That’s telling that Gustave’s words were true.

“Be that as it may, if I take too much time, I don’t know what will happen. So let’s get it over with as quickly as possible.”

As Gustave said so, one of the Hydra’s heads greatly opened its mouth.

One could see that a huge amount of mana was swirling in there.

(This is...!)

“!” “Ayato, dodge it!”

Ayato’s body moved even earlier than Julis’ warning.

A moment later, the light released from the Hydra’s mouth blew away the concrete dike as it scooped it out.

“...It can match the power level of Saya’s lux.”

If Ayato had received it head on, he would not get off with simple bruises even if he invested his prana to defense.

“Well then, I shall excuse myself with this. Please fully enjoy yourself.”

As he said that, Gustave greatly leapt back and disappeared within the darkness.

“Kuh!”

As to block the way of Julis who tried to chase after him, the Hydra once again released a light ray.

“Julis, watch out!”

Ayato held Julis and evaded it just barely.

“S-Sorry. You saved me.”

“Let’s leave Gustave. Anyway for now, we must deal with this.”

Ayato once again looked up at the huge figure before his eyes. The Hydra which has slowly gone ashore from the lake revealed its whole body now. It seemed to be just like a skyscraper.

While mowing down the barracks on the lake shore with an earth tremor, the Hydra slowly advanced as it crossed the slums.

Ahead of it — was the orphanage.

If it aimed for there, it probably knew well that Julis would never abandon it.

“Damn! So, he means ‘if you want to protect it, try to stop this guy’...!”

Julis, who couldn’t help but curse so, quite lost her cool.

“Julis, I leave the evacuation of the residents to you.”

“Wha! Don’t tell me you plan to stop it by yourself?”

“I’ll see what I can do. Besides, Saya should be almost ready now.”

“But...”

Julis put on a face showing that she still could not consent.

“I don’t know this area very well, and above all everyone will listen if you’re the one to lead them, right?”

“...I got it. But, be careful not to act rashly.”

As soon as she said that, wings of flame manifested on Julis’s back.

Ayato, who saw off Julis flying away as is, went up to the roof of a nearby building and confirmed the situation. Since the Hydra was just intently going straight ahead without even minding the buildings, a straight way was newly made. But it was quite slow on its feet, so there should be enough time to stop it.

In fact, when Ayato ran after it while going along the buildings’ roofs, he was able to quickly catch up with it.

“That said, how to deal with this...?”

Although he looked for a chance while maintaining a certain distance from the Hydra and keeping pace with it, it was a more troublesome opponent than expected. Its movement was slow

compared with the magic beasts so far; but because it built up a defense zone with no blind spots thanks to its nine heads, it was obvious that Ayato would be countered if he attacked carelessly.

After all, the opponent had this huge body. In order for one to set an attack, he would have no choice but to jump using the buildings' roofs as footholds and slash at the Hydra; but movements in the air are limited, so evasion would also become difficult. Even the state of "cognition" would be helpless with only this much.

"I guess there's no other choice but to mince it bit by bit to the best of my ability."

As Ayato fixed his breathing, he jumped into the Hydra's range at a stretch.

"

Guooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooh!"

The Hydra stopped its advance and along with a roar, three heads released light rays towards Ayato.

Ayato greatly jumped as he dodged all of them by a paper thin distance and swung <Ser-Versta>.

"

Giiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiih!"

The front head was bisected from the middle with a single stroke, and a high-pitched scream resounded through the night sky.

“All right!”

Light rays attacked so as to aim at his landing, but that much was taken into consideration by Ayato.

Ayato changed his trajectory as he kicked the wall of a building in mid-air and easily avoided it — but,

“Eh...?”

Before his eyes, something unexpected happened.

When he thought that the head that he had cut down just now bubbled with a burbling sound, it gradually swelled and soon regenerated to how it was before.

“Is even this point like in the myth...?”

If his memory served him right, the Hydra of Greek mythology was a monster that would grow two heads from the place where one head, other than the central one among its nine heads, was cut. So it was better to say that it did not only regenerate, but also doubled; but in the myth, it should also be mentioned that the regeneration could be stopped by burning the cut part. If so, then it wasn't as if he didn't think that would apply in the case that a head was cut with this <Ser-Versta>, but——

“Well, even if I say that, it can’t be helped I guess.”

At least, now that it came to this, it would be necessary to change tactics.

“Even if I aim at the central head, I think that the other heads would just protect it... So first, I must get rid of them.”

Fortunately, since it takes a while before completely regenerating, he had no choice but to do something in the meantime.

As Ayato set up <Ser-Versta>, he returned again to a roof and once again estimated the distance.

If the timing in which he is to step in was off even a little, the next instant either Ayato’s body would be blown off by that light ray or it might as well end up in the Hydra’s stomach.

“...Phew.”

He flowed prana to every corner of his body and shortened the distance little by little by sliding his feet.

At that moment — Ayato’s perception which was expanded by the state of “cognition” grasped something moving within his battle range. When he hurriedly turned his gaze to that direction, one young woman was sunk down there in the shade of debris as she failed to escape.

She was probably paralyzed with terror. It looked like she was unable to move decently.

Moreover, the worst thing was that the debris which covered her looked like it would collapse at any time.

(It's bad...!)

Ayato reflexively jumped out and kicked flying the debris as to protect the woman.

Though the woman opened her eyes wide in surprise, unfortunately Ayato had no time to call out to her. This was because he'd already sensed a bloodlust directed to him.

He immediately tried to change position so that the woman wouldn't be involved, but just before that, one of the Hydra's heads sneaked around before Ayato's eyes.

"Kuh...!"

He promptly set up <Ser-Versta> again, but even he understood that he would be slightly late.

Just before the huge jaw was opened, and the large sword-like fangs and the deep crimson tongue which flickeringly wriggled were about to seize Ayato——

"

Gugiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiih!"

Immediately after the head fell down, it rolled over and writhed

.

At the same time, Ayato got contacted in his portable terminal.

He quickly operated it and opened a space window; projected there was Saya with a sight visor.

『...It was a close call.

“Saya! Thank you, you saved us!”

『My preparations are complete. Is this snake-like thing the target?

“Yes. It’ll somewhat turn into monster extermination, but I leave the support to you.”

Saya should currently be on the lake shore near the royal palace. The hit just now was a long-range sniping.

In other words, Saya pulled it off from a place located on the opposite bank of the lake. There should be easily 3 km even if she placed herself in the nearest place, but as one would expect of Saya . It was a remarkable skill.

『Roger. I want to confirm the situation at any time, so please leave the space window open.

“I got it.”

While nodding at her words, he led the woman of a while ago to a safe direction with his line of sight. He wanted to accompany her until a safe zone if possible, but as expected there was no room to do that.

“Saya, we probably can’t kill this thing unless we cut its central head. So before that——”

『...I’ll get rid of the other heads.

“Right. Even if we were to cut off the other heads afterwards, they will regenerate a short time later; so be careful about that point, too.”

『I understand. Are there any other conditions?

“That’s all.”

『Ok. Well then —— let’s do it.

With Saya’s words as the signal, Ayato dashed at the Hydra with a stretch.

“

Guruoooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooh!”

As if it was a matter of course, the nine heads turned around so as to intercept him and released light rays aiming for Ayato.

But, just before one of the heads spat out a light ray, it exploded like a little while ago.

“Haaa!”

The coordination of the nine heads was perfect with no opening at all, but conversely speaking, if even one of them was destroyed, one could easily create an opening. Although Saya’s attack had not enough power to completely blow off the head, it was enough to create an opening.

Ayato greatly jumped while slipping through the light rays, and swung down <Ser-Versta> with all his strength.

Its blade easily bisected the first head in the front and then another one with the sword returning.

“With this, that makes two!”

He jumped from roof to roof and immediately moved to attack again even if from a somewhat reckless posture.

This was the only way in order to not give it time to regenerate as much as possible.

In return, he was also left greatly opened to attacks, but——

『...Next, right and diagonally to the rear.

“Roger!”

Those openings were splendidly covered by Saya’s shooting.

Even without Ayato saying anything, she shot the head he wanted her to attack the most and in that timing he attacked what she wanted the most. Conversely, before Ayato told her, Saya knew almost intuitively which head he wanted her to aim at.

“With this, that makes four!”

After <Ser-Versta> mowed down the fourth head, Saya laughed a little on the other side of the space window.

『...It's really been a long time since I acted as Ayato's backup like this.

“Hahaha, that's right.”

Ayato also smiled wryly while evading the light rays.

Certainly, he had fought all the time through the <Phoenix> with Julis, and there was also a time when he jointly fought with Kirin, but it was since when they were children that he fought together with Saya like this.

『Ayato is amazing after all. You move as if you're reading my thoughts.

“That goes for you as well —— all right, that makes six with this!”

There are three heads remaining.

But, the two heads he cut off first were almost completely regenerated.

He'd better hurry.

"Saya, let's settle it with the next move."

『...I got it.

Ayato fixed his disturbed breathing in an instant and poured prana into <Ser-Versta>.

The black pattern surrounding the blade expanded and the pure white blade grew long easily exceeding Ayato's height.

——It was Meteor Arts.

Although it was not flexible and the sword's speed was slow, but if it was now when the heads decreased to three, there should be no problem.

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

As Ayato who jumped in the air mowed down <Ser-Versta>, two out of the three remaining heads were bisected.

Although it had been skillfully dodged by the central head which was the main head, this too was within expectation.

As the central head was about to release a light ray towards the defenseless Ayato after the attack, Saya's sniping prevented it.

(Next, I should fix my stance and then another blow——)

The moment he was thinking that, a chill ran down his back.

When looking, the head which he cut off first had already finished regenerating and greatly opened its mouth.

“Wha!?”

Considering the regeneration speed, there should’ve been a little deferment before the regeneration was complete.

However, that question was immediately solved.

The regeneration of the other heads had stopped.

(So, it accelerated its regeneration ability by narrowing it down to one...!)

A direct hit was unavoidable in this timing.

“In that case——!”

He risked everything and brandished <Ser-Versta> in that unreasonable posture.

It was a blow aiming for a simultaneous strike, but it couldn’t be helped.

“Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

“Guoooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooh!”

He swung down with <Ser-Versta>so as to press and cut the light ray released along with the head —— but probably because his posture was much too unreasonable, the blade had slightly deviated from the central head.

Ayato, who received a direct hit as he couldn't pull through the Hydra's light ray although he was able to reduce its power, was greatly blown away and flung against a partially destroyed building.

“Guh...!”

His body creaked to the impact, but it was not to the extent that he could not move.

『...Ayato!

“I-I'm all right...! More importantly, if we don't hurry, the regeneration will again...”

While raising his hand to Saya who had a worried expression and answering, Ayato tightly gripped <Ser-Versta> again.

“No —— you did well, you two. Thanks to you two, I was able to complete my set up^[14].”

At this time, a familiar voice suddenly fell from the sky.

When looking up, Julis who flapped wings of flame greatly raised both her arms in the air.

“Come out ——

Rafflesia Duo Flos

Great Sparkling Bomb Ring Flower - Twin Blooming Flowers!”

At that moment, a huge double layer type magic square emerged from under the Hydra and its huge body was completely enveloped in a great explosion.

“

———!”

The Hydra which was swallowed in the explosive flames seemed to raise something displaying its death throes, but it could not even utter a sound as its throat was immediately burnt. It showed signs of writhing and struggling for a very short time, then immediately hung its head limply and stopped moving.

The ground was greatly scooped out by the explosion and the snow piled up around the newly formed crater melted due to the heat wave.

It was a heat as if only this area was completely changed from midwinter to midsummer.

“Amazing...”

Ayato muttered in blank amazement.

Judging from the name, two-fold attack of Great Sparkling Bomb Ring Flower—— it was an unfathomable power.

“Just to note, this can be considered a new technique. Well, it’s too powerful, so I probably won’t have an opportunity to use it in a tournament.”

“...Indeed.”

In the first place with the size of a tournament’s stage, even they would probably get caught up in it, too.

『...Julis, hold on.

However, Saya suddenly raised a sharp voice.

『It looks like it isn’t over yet.

“What did you say?”

As she strained her eyes when being told that, something white was wriggling within the explosive flames which gradually subsided.

It was the Hydra’s skeleton.

“!” “Are you telling me that that monster can regenerate even from bones...?!”

Julis muttered with an amazed face.

『...Ayato

“Yes, I know.”

When Ayato started running as he said that, he set up <Ser-Versta> and greatly jumped.

No matter how you look at it, anymore than this was too cruel.

As he set his aim at the central head which became only bones like that of a fossil now, Ayato quietly swung <Ser-Versta>.

The sword flash glittered and the head was soundlessly severed

“...With this, it’s over.”

As Ayato who landed closed his eyes while muttering so, the Hydra’s bones behind him melted and disappeared in the wind.

- -

“Geez, I give up.”

Gustave who was watching the situation from high ground greatly shrugged his shoulders and sighed.

He put away the scope he had in his hand into his breast pocket and smoothed down his mustache.

He didn't think that even the Hydra would be defeated, but when doing jobs like these, things don't always go as planned.

"There is no helping it. I shall look for the next chance then."

Gustave was going to leave the place after saying so — but, he suddenly noticed the figure of a person.

"...This is a surprise. How did you arrive here?"

"You are not the type to directly involve yourself in the fighting. But, you must make sure of the results on the nature of your job. In that case, even if you withdraw from the battle, you will definitely not go far away from it. This is Julis-san's judgment."

That silhouette's —Toudou Kirin's face was showed as it was gradually illuminated by the moonlight.

"There are not too many places in this neighborhood where one can have a general view of the slums. After checking all those places..."

"Yes, by doing so you may figure out this place, huh. I see, I see."
"

Gustave concentrated his prana while nodding.

Kirin who noticed it also put her hand on the katana to her waist.

“Could you obediently surrender yourself? Frankly speaking, for you who exhausted your prana, it will be impossible to win against me.”

“Hmm... You’re certainly right.”

A huge amount of prana was necessary to summon the Hydra. And since in addition to that this time, he also summoned a great number of Dora-Colchis in order to use them as decoys, Gustave had little prana remaining.

“But —— it is not like I’m completely out of options. Do you know what this is?”

Gustave said that and took a small bag out of his breast pocket.

He opened it and threw out the contents to the ground.

“Are those... the fangs of some animal?”

It seemed to be hard to tell what they were as they were white like the snow covering the ground, but even so Kirin questioned with a quizzical look.

“Correct answer. These are the fangs of a dragon.”

“A dragon?”

“Yes. There are some in the myth of Jason, right? Soldiers, Spartoi^[15] born from fangs which were sown in the earth... In other words, they are dragon tooth warriors.”

“!”

When Gustave grinned, magic squares unfolded one after another around the fangs sown in the ground and skeleton soldiers with swords and shields appeared from there. There were six in total.

“It’s an application of the setting type ability. Because prana is used when making the fangs, it does not require the consumption of prana at the time of using them. Well, there are many restrictions and they are not so strong individually, but...”

While saying that, Gustave took distance from Kirin little by little.

“From what I hear, your Toudou Style is fencing specialized in a one-on-one fight. Then even if I can’t defeat you, I will at least gain enough time so as to escape.”

The dragon tooth warriors flickered blue flames inside their eye sockets and slowly surrounded Kirin while their bones made a dry , sharp ringing sound.

“...Haa”

Kirin heaved a small sigh and shook her head.

“Certainly, unlike Ayato-senpai’s Amagiri Bright Dragon Style, there are not so many techniques which assumed a one-to-many fight in the Toudou Style. And when it comes to actual fighting level, there are almost none. But——”

While saying that, Kirin drew out the Nihontou^[16] from her waist.

“If it’s me personally, then it’s another story.”

“What did you say...?”

Gustave could not help but frown at her words.

“In my diligent every day training since before... and moreover after meeting with Ayato-senpai, I especially felt strongly that progress and diversity are necessary for techniques.”

Kirin held the Nihontou in her right hand and its scabbard, which she took off from her waist, in her left hand and set it up on half her body.

“Dual Sword Style...?”

Gustave unwittingly stepped back. The pressure from the girl before him who wasn’t even half his age appealed to Gustave’s experience, making him backing off.

“Kuh...! Charge!”

But, as Gustave held out until the very limit, he greatly waved his arm and gave an order.

The dragon tooth warriors which have surrounded Kirin attacked all at once.

——However.

The next moment, all the dragon tooth warriors crumbled down in pieces.

“I-Impossible...!”

Gustave could hardly catch it, but Kirin saw through the attacks of the two dragon tooth warriors which attacked from behind with just a glance. Her drawn sword repelled others from their side, causing a little lag in their attack. Furthermore, when she cut down the two dragon tooth warriors at the front of her with one hand, she mowed down the heads of the dragon tooth warriors on the right and left flank while rotating her body at the same time. And finally she knocked down the two at the rear.

Although Gustave stood stock still with a dumbfounded face, he immediately came to his senses and started running towards the forest.

——But.

Kirin went around ahead of him in an instant and mercilessly drove in a sword strike.

“Gahah...!”

To Gustave whose eyes were rolled back and who fell down on the snow, Kirin said while putting her sword back in the sheath.

“Please rest assured —— I struck you with the back of the sword.”

Chapter 7 – Reunion

Ayato and company joined Kirin and delivered the body of Gustave who lost consciousness to the police.

Drugs to congest the flow of prana were used for the restraint of <Starpulse Generation> —— <Dante> and <Strega> among them. This was because as long as they could not concentrate prana, they could not activate their abilities. But because the effect time wasn't so long, in addition to that, there were cases where isolation spaces which removed mana were prepared in prisons or facilities where they (<Starpulse Generation>) were detained for a long period of time.

Ayato and company also tagged along to explain the circumstances and the night transitioned into dawn when they finally returned to the royal palace.

Jolbert who sat down on the immediate grand staircase after they entered the royal palace was resting his chin on his hand while revealing a troubled smile. Maria who was next to him was leaking a peaceful sleeper's breathing as she leaned on him.

It looked like they have been waiting here all night long.

"Well, you did a good job. It's really good that you're all safe."

"...Ngh?"

Maria awoken due to his voice and briskly rubbed her sleepy eyes.

After Jolbert turned gentle eyes to such a Maria, he greatly shrugged his shoulders.

“But... Unfortunately, your popularity has risen again with this
”

“Are you dissatisfied with this, Big Brother?”

Then, Julis took a step forward with a grim face.

“After all, I’ll lose my position.”

“I see...”

As Julis deeply sighed there, she stared straight into Jolbert’s eyes and said.

“Then Big Brother, I’ll take this opportunity and ask you this.”

“Hmm, what?”

“——I want you to help me.”

At these words, Jolbert widely opened his eyes.

It was unexpected for Jolbert, who was usually evasive no matter what she said to him, to openly reveal this much surprise an expression.

“Julis... just now, what did you say?”

Without removing her gaze from Jolbert who nervously confirmed, Julis continued.

“Thanks to this matter, I’m now convinced. That I can’t continue like this after all. I have been able to save the orphanage. But, that’s to the bitter end a stop-gap measure; it’ll be impossible to change this country if I don’t start from its core.”

“That’s theoretically plausible, but how specifically?”

“...Winning the <Gryps> and expanding the King’s power.”

At that moment, Jolbert stiffened.

“W-Wait a minute. Julis, are you seriously saying th... looks like it.”

“Of course, you’ll thread through a fair procedure through an assembly. But, that assembly will be done as the current Integrated Enterprise Foundation says so. And then we’ll take advantage of that, too.”

To Julis who self-derisively laughed, Jolbert muttered with a dumbfounded face.

“It’s certainly possible as the reward of the <Festa> and it isn’t as if there has been no precedent so far, but...”

Although Lieseltania was an extreme precedent, it was a well-known fact that other existing nations were also under the Integrated Enterprise Foundation’s control. In any country, all the

rights were limited to provision and when needed, the Integrated Enterprise Foundation could seize and tampered with them to their heart's content.

That said, if left to one individual's will, it was again another matter.

"I'm aware that it's absurd. I may be about to choose a wrong method. But, that's my unfeigned wish and above all — in that city, the <Festa> should be existing for that purpose, right?"

As Julis paused once there, she closed her eyes as if to cut off her hesitation... and then reopened them.

"And when that happens, I'll be causing burden and trouble to you two, Big Brother and Big Sister^[17]. But even so... please, Big Brother. Could you lend me your strength?"

"....."Jolbert, staying silent for a while, confronted Julis' gaze head on, but before long he burst into laughter as he could no longer bear it.

"Puh...Hahahahahahaha! Haah, amazing! I never expected that a day would come when Julis would rely on me. You've really changed...!"

"W-What are you laughing for?! Big Brother, I'm seriously...!"

"I know, I know. But, I wonder if this is also due to Amagiri-kun — no, to you people's influence."

While dodging Julis who raised her eyes, Jolbert joyfully — and really cheerfully said that.

“Big Brother, my talk...!”

“I got it, Julis.”

“...Eh?”

Since Jolbert nodded with perfect timing, Julis was taken aback for an instant.

“Honestly, I don’t know how much I can help you, but... I promise. If you can really win the <Gryps>, at that time I’ll also resolve myself and graduate from being a ‘dimwit’. —Maria, how about you?”

“Hmm, I don’t understand complicated things, but... If it’s something that you have decided, I will follow you, Jolbert.”

The fluffy queen chuckled as she said so.

There, Julis finally revealed a relieved expression.

“Big Brother, Big Sister... Thank you very much.”

It looked like Julis had strengthened her resolve.

“Fufufu...what a wonderful pair of brother and sister.”

Kirin standing next to Ayato said to him in a low voice while smiling.

“Yes, indeed.”

While answering so, Ayato overlapped the two’s figures with himself and his sister.

Of course, Haruka and Jolbert were completely different in character and all other things; and yet there was a close resemblance for some reason.

——At this time, Ayato’s portable terminal suddenly notified him of a call.

“Huh? Who is it at such time?”

As he opened the space window while saying that, projected there was an unexpected face.

“Eh...? Captain Lindvall!?”

Since he did not think that he would directly be contacted by Helga, he was a little confused.

『Sorry to contact you so suddenly. It’s probably still early morning there, but I’m glad that my call went through. I thought that it’d better to inform you as soon as possible you see.

“...What is it?”

Since that Helga said up to there, it was probably not a trivial matter.

『I will briefly convey the matter. ——Amagiri Ayato, we found out your big sister's whereabouts.

“——!”

These words ran through Ayato's body with a shock like thunder.

- -

“——Welcome back. You came back really late, eh.”

When Claudia welcomed him with a smile, the man opened wide his eyes as he was taken aback for an instant.

London suburbs, the Enfield Family Mansion.

This mansion with a Gothic Revival architecture^[18], which was dismantled and then rebuilt by Tee Burton, was to the bitter end only one of the mansions that the Enfield Household owned. But, Claudia knew well that this man would extremely suit this atmosphere of nostalgia.

“Fufufu, you do not need to be so surprised. After all, this place is also my home. Isn't that right, Father?”

“...It has been a long time since we have met each other directly this way, Claudia.”

“It’s because no matter how many times I try to contact you through your portable terminal, you will not pick up. Then I thought that I have no other choice but to meet you directly.”

“.....”

The man ——Nicholas Enfield, Claudia’s father, took off his coat with a somewhat tired face. An old man who soundlessly appeared respectfully took it and retired soundlessly in the same way.

Nicholas was a handsome man with a good physique. Though he would turn 50 in this year, he had a suitable presence and dignity and he neatly combed down his blond hair which has begun mixing with white hair.

“You may already be aware, but Gustave Malraux has been arrested. I intended to have you cancel the request and thus came here, but...my friends are excellent after all. They had settled it before I arrived.”

“Yes, I have heard about it. I guess he was a man as good as the rumors said.”

Nicholas casually said.

“Ara, you frankly admit it contrary to my expectations. I think that he probably did not reveal anything about his client though.”

“It’d be useless even if I were to feign ignorance with you. So, what will you do? Will you denounce me?”

“No way. There is no way that I will do something wasteful like that.”

Claudia innocently laughed.

“People of Galaxy hired a criminal to attack Seidoukan Academy’s students, and the Princess of a country — I do not intend to futilely waste such a card. I will carefully preserve it.”

“Galaxy has nothing to do with this. It is to the bitter end my own discretion.”

“Of course I am aware of it. After all, if Galaxy seriously made a move, there is no way that they would choose such a tepid way. However in Father’s position, there is no way that such an excuse will work, right? I think that even Mother will surely judge so.”

“...Probably.”

Nicholas sighed with an expression filled with resignation.

Nicholas’s title was CRO Assistant. It was a post where he acted as support for Claudia’s mother who was an executive official of Galaxy Integration Headquarters. It was a position exceedingly close to an executive, but Claudia knew that her father could never become an executive. Similarly to Toudou Kouichiro, Kirin’s uncle, he was purely not of that caliber.

“I’m sure that Mother has also noticed anyway. And yet she tacitly allowed it.”

“It may be so, but... I don’t know. I never know about what she is thinking.”

Nicholas slowly shook his head.

“But, I can at least affirm one thing. Since I failed, she will move in the near future and at that time, she absolutely won’t hesitate to abandon me if she judges it necessary. And when that happens, your card this time will be useless.”

“I guess so.”

“Do you understand, Claudia?! If that happens...!”

“I understand well that Father acted thinking for my sake.”

Right. Nicholas was gentle.

That’s why he could never become an executive.

“...Will you participate in the <Gryps> no matter what?”

“Yes.”

“Then, change your wish at least. Please. It’s not too late yet.”

“As I have said many times, I cannot do that, too.”

Claudia flatly declared.

Only that, she could not do it.

After all, it was for that reason that Claudia has endured day after day so far.

“I...I really love you, Claudia...”

Nicholas’s voice was so weak that it seemed like it would disappear at any time.

Claudia passing by the side of Nicholas who hung his head opened the door.

“I love you too, Father.”

Not only her father, but her mother too. Claudia loved her family.

But unfortunately, it was not to the extent of balancing with Claudia’s wish.

No, in the first place there was nothing equal with another in this world.

“Then, good bye.”

Claudia said so and closed the door.

While hearing the heavy resounding of separation, Claudia looked up at the sky of the wintry midwinter.

- -

Ayato, who had returned slightly earlier by everyone's recommendation, headed to the hospital located in the central district as soon as he came back to Asterisk. Originally, he had to stay in Lieseltania for several days concerning the post processing and circumstantial explanation of the incident, but because he was exempted from all these thanks to Jolbert's support, only about half a day has passed since he received the call from Helga.

Perhaps because it was quite impromptu, he could not deny his physical fatigue; but now Ayato had no time to worry about something like that.

“——You came, huh.”

Helga was waiting alone in front of the hospital.

“Captain Lindvall, where is Nee-san —— my big sister...?!”

“Now, wait. Anyway, follow me. We'll talk after that.”

Helga, who was calm in contrast to the anxious Ayato, went into the hospital as soon as she said so. As he helplessly followed after her as he was told to, Helga steadily proceeded to the interior in a familiar way and guided Ayato to an area where originally no one except for authorized personnel could enter.

The hospital was separated from the skyscraper style main institution, which actually performed medical treatment, examinations and the like, with the hospitalization ridge connected

to a corridor. There was one room located in the basement of the main institution there.

“The hospital director’s office...?”

Disregarding Ayato who doubtfully thought, Helga knocked on the door.

When the door opened as it slid and he went in following Helga, two people were standing in the surprisingly small room.

One was an old man with a white gown that seemed quite obstinate and who was quite short. Though he was almost bald, he grew a pure white beard on his mouth abundantly. At first glance, he had a displeased expression and was frequently tapping a desk with a finger.

The other person was a familiar face.

“Management Committee Chairman... Why are you here?”

“There are many circumstances, you see. —Ah, this is Director Yan Korbel. He is the chief executive of the hospital.”

The <Festa> Management Committee Chairman Madiath Mesa said so and introduced the old man.

But, the old man turned around to Madiath immediately after stealing only a glance at Ayato.

“Unfortunately, I’m busy. So, let’s quickly get it over with.”

Then, Helga quietly whispered into Ayato's ear.

“——The director is always like this. So, don't worry about it.”

As he gave a small nod to that, Ayato looked at Madiath.

“Chairman, did you really find out my big sister's whereabouts?”

“Yes, I intend to explain about the circumstances from now on, but... the director seems to be in a hurry, so is it alright to talk while walking?”

“Yes, I don't mind it...”

When he answered so as he didn't really understand, Madiath urged Yan with eyes implying something.

“Then, Director.”

“...Humph.”

With a sour look as is, Yan headed to the wall in the back and soundlessly opened that wall.

Though ahead seemed like a passage, it wasn't to the extent of the so-called hidden room and it seemed to be quite a big facility.

“From here on out is a special area. Only the director and an extremely restricted number of staff can access here.”

While advancing as they were guided through the pure white corridor by Yan, Madiath slowly began to speak.

“Now, I guess that you’ve already heard about the former Chairman Danilo, too.”

“Yes. Only a little though.”

“I see. Then, that makes things easier. This time, as Captain Lindvall was reinvestigating about him and the <Eclipse>, she found a flow of new funds. One among them was connected to Director Korbel here.”

“Flow of funds...?”

“I say it like this, but it isn’t really something rare. There are many injured here that we don’t want to make public.”

“It’s something undesirable for us the police though.”

Though Helga interjected in a cold voice, Madiath responded to that with only a wry smile.

“Even the you in those days would have consented regarding the independence of hospitals.”

Instead, Yan who advanced at the front said so without turning around.

“The situation in those days and that of now are different. Besides even in those days, I’d just show a mind of passive

approval to the bitter end. In fact, independence is given a broad interpretation.”

“Now, now, you two... Anyway, it’s good as long as you understand that this is a highly secret place. The hospital by no means leaks secrets nor inquires about patients who were once taken care of here. Such are the rules. That’s why nobody knew that your big sister ——Amagiri Haruka-san had been carried here.”

“!” “Then, my big sister is here, right?”

“Yes. It seems to have been a request from Danilo.”

At the same time that he felt relieved to that answer, he had no choice but to confront an anxiety he had never felt so far.

“My sister... is she safe?”

He understood that this was a special place even in Asterisk.

If his sister has been carried to such a place, then his sister’s situation was probably not common.

“That’s... it’s a difficult question to answer.”

“——It’s here.”

Yan who was walking in the front stopped and pointed at the wall on the right side.

Though there, nothing other than a plate with a room number could be seen, when Yan operated an optic keyboard which he called out, the wall's surface suddenly became transparent.

In that room which became glass-sided, for some reason there were many large machines, a bed which fixed at the center, and—
—

“Nee-san!”

Sleeping on that bed was without a doubt Ayato's big sister, Amagiri Haruka.

Ayato unintentionally came near the glass, but her face, which he saw for the first time in five years, did not change at all from the one in his memories. No, you might even say that it stayed the same.

“...Director Korbelt, when did my sister come here?”

“If my memory serves me right, it was about five years ago that ... I was asked by Danilo to awaken her.”

Yan answered after a little thought.

It meant that his big sister has been in this condition immediately after she came to Asterisk after all.

“I wasn’t told her name. Without certain evidence, originally I’m not to lend a hand in the garrison’s investigation, too — but, it’s different this time. If it’s a wish of the <Festa>, there is no help it.”

“Once the <Festa>’s wish is accepted, it’s carried out with the highest priority after all. And if necessary, all the Integrated Enterprise Foundations must cooperate. This is an absolute unwritten law in order to maintain the <Festa>.”

Madiath said with a serious expression.

“What kind of state is my sister in?”

“Nothing has changed since the time she was carried here. Her body is currently in a state close to apparent death. As for the reason... we think that it’s an effect due to some kind of ability.”

“Is it a power similar to mine?”

However, Ayato slowly shook his head to the words of Helga who was a time control ability user.

“No — probably, this is my big sister’s own power.”

“Hmm?”

Yan looked at Ayato with a grim face.

“What do you mean? Explain yourself.”

“The power to bind all creation... That’s my sister’s ability. I don’t know why, but I think that she might have exerted it on herself.”

“Hmm, I see...”

Ayato could feel that the same shackles which were applied to him by his big sister were slightly resonating. It was a reaction so weak that it would normally not be strange if he didn’t notice it, but he might have become sensitive by being near his big sister who was cause of the seal.

Although there was no conviction, there was probably no mistaking it.

(The problem is, why did she do something like that...? And most of all——)

“Director, how is my sister’s treatment going?”

“Gumuh...!”

Then, Yan’s complexion openly changed and he averted his eyes.

“Well, honestly speaking... It’s the present condition that we can’t provide any effective treatment worth mentioning for.”

“What do you mean? Ability cancellation is your field of expertise, isn’t it?”

As Helga knitted her brows, Yan pouted.

“Even I’m not omnipotent. These five years, I tried all kinds of treatments I could think of, but the result is as you see.”

“Supposing that this state continues... Is there any danger to her life?”

It was a bold and necessary question, but she had to ask.

“Ah, there is no problem regarding that. If this state continues as is, she will probably outlive you. On the premise that you’ll be still alive, that is.”

“...That so.”

Although it was not a situation that one should be pleased with, if that was the case, they might feel relieved for the time being.

“By the way, why did you continue with my sister’s treatment until now?”

“What do you mean by that?”

Yan asked back with a dubious face.

“The former Chairman Danilo, who did the request, has already passed away, right? So, didn’t the contract end at that point?”

The fact that there was a flow of funds from Danilo meant that Yan had already received the remuneration. That said, Ayato did not think that it was an amount which assumed treatment for five years. Normally thinking, it should be in the red long ago.

However.

“You fool! I didn’t fall so low to the point of abandoning a patient that I once took over. Danilo died, but the contract is still valid.”

Yan said so and looked at Ayato.

“However, now that it has come to this, you should do as you like. It’s also fine if you want to transfer her to another hospital.”

“...No. Please continue your treatment.”

Though he also had to consult with his father, he felt like that was the best choice to make.

“I see. Then well, I’ll continue the treatment. I’ll advise you not to expect too much though.”

“Thank you.”

Ayato said so and deeply bowed his head.

Then Yan revealed a surprised expression for an instant.

“How can you thank me in this situation?”

“...Eh?”

“Humph! It’s nothing!”

As Yan curtly said so, he briskly walked along the passage.

“U-Um...”

“I’ll give you a pass later! Use the passage for personnel during your visit! All right?!”

“...Yes.”

Next to Ayato who was dumbfounded, Madiath smiled wryly.

“In other words, he’s that kind of person.”

Behind him, Helga muttered in her usual calm voice.

“He didn’t change at all even after 50 years.”

- -

As he came out of the hospital, a raging night wind pierced his body.

But compared with Lieseltania where he was until yesterday, it was still somewhat warm.

“It’s quite late. Shall I drop you off at Seidoukan Academy?”

“No, it’s all right.”

Helga said with a face which did not show even one bit that she was cold, but Ayato politely declined.

He was thankful for the offer, but he felt like he wanted to be alone a little in order to sort out his thoughts.

Madiath said that he was pressed for time and got in a car which came to pick him up a little earlier.

“I see. Then, I shall excuse myself.”

“Yes. Thank you for everything.”

He didn’t think that he would find his big sister so quickly.

He felt like he could not thank Helga enough for that.

“You don’t need to thank me. It’s my job after all. But... as expected just in case, I’ll tell you this.”

Helga suddenly lowered her voice and said.

“——Don’t trust Madiath Mesa too much.”

“Eh?”

As he was about to ask what she meant, he gasped at her sharp gaze which drew nearer.

“Although this time, the investigation about Danilo was approved, but permission wasn’t granted to everything he did. It was only a very limited part. And yet, we happened to succeed in

drawing out a big hit from that, and it was coincidentally that the information was connected to Amagiri Haruka's whereabouts."

"Aren't you reading too much into it...?"

"That's right. As Madiath had said, everything is given priority regarding the wish of the <Festa>. If in the beginning there was no clue in the range that permission was granted for, we would have requested to investigate a wider range. And they wouldn't have been able to refuse it... I apologize to you for saying this, but we felt mortified to have found her this early."

Of course, it was something joyous for Ayato that his big sister has been found this quickly, but he could understand what Helga was saying. After all, it was a rare chance for her.

"It just seems as if the place of that information was known beforehand and was left to be found by us while only letting us investigate to the bare minimum. And it seemed that it was Madiath who specified that range (of investigation)."

"Eh? But, why would the Chairman explicitly do such a thing...?"

It should originally be Madiath Mesa's job to manage and control the <Festa>.

"Well, there is a reason which seems quite plausible. Madiath, at the time when he was a Steering Committee member, was the leader of the anti-Danilo faction. Therefore after that guy's death, he was selected as the representative of the internal investigation

committee. If it was called go with the flow, it is somewhat unnatural, but it isn't like it wasn't understandable. Since the matter of Danilo is still treated as taboo in the Steering Committee, they couldn't afford to entrust it to a half-assed person."

Certainly, the reasons added up.

"So this is to the bitter end my intuition. But unfortunately, my intuition is famous for often hitting the bull's eye. And in a bad way at that."

"It isn't that pleasant a special skill, eh."

"You said it."

To Ayato who smiled wryly, Helga's eyes slightly loosened.

"Then, I'll leave this time for sure. Please, be careful."

When Helga lightly raised her hands, she left while raising footsteps of good feeling.

"Haa... somehow, there are many things to think about."

But even so, there was no doubt that he was finally able to meet his big sister.

And that feeling finally boiled up at this point.

(...Five years, huh)

It was by no means a short time.

As for Ayato, it was nearly a third of his lifetime until now.

“Nee-san...”

He unintentionally uttered his voice, and hurriedly shook his head.

It was still early to be glad. At this rate, it wasn’t possible even to talk to her.

“But, there is nothing more I can do...”

Unknowingly, he once again uttered his voice.

——And.

“That’s not right.”

A voice suddenly came from behind him.

“Eh?”

When he hurriedly turned around, standing there was a woman

It wasn’t like he didn’t notice her presence. But since he didn’t think that she would accost him, he was surprised.

“You’re Amagiri Ayato, right?”

The woman was somewhat older than Ayato. Her bodily build was thin; she had a slender figure and long arms and legs.

Because she wore a white gown, he first thought that she was a female hospital doctor or the like, but upon close inspection, what she wore underneath was Allekant's uniform.

Although she had well-ordered features, perhaps because of her somewhat upturned eyes, she gave off a slightly suspicious atmosphere. She had semi-long hair without consistency and her big glasses were impressive.

"That's right, but who are you?"

"Kishishishi, excuse me for this. I'm Hilda. Hilda Jane Rowlands. Please call me Hilda."

Raising laughter dry like the rustling of clothes, the woman who called herself Hilda narrowed her eyes like a cat.

"So... do you have business with me?"

While Ayato talked, he felt a strange sense of incongruity.

If he had to say it, it was close to the feeling of when he met Orphelia the other day, yet he couldn't feel any threat (danger) from the woman in front of him. Probably, she was not even a < Starpulse Generation >, or she did not knead her prana at all. Even judging from her unstable carriage, it hardly looked like she trained her body.

And yet for some reason, Ayato was overawed by Hilda.

“Ah, oh yes, that’s right. Amagiri Ayato. I was thinking that you might need my help.”

“Eh...?”

He didn’t understand the meaning of what she said.

“Kishishishi.”

Perhaps because it showed on his face, Hilda once again laughed with that strange laughter.

“After all, you want to treat your big sister, right?”

“!” “How do you know that...?!”

Although Ayato reflexively put himself on guard, Hilda joyfully shrugged her shoulders without being shaken at all.

“Of course, I’d know it. After all, we, the <U^{Tenorio}bermensch Faction>, hold a deep pipe (connection) with this hospital. It got leaked, leaked.”

<U^{Tenorio}bermensch Faction>. He was familiar with that name.

“Oh, and I also saw the news. Our Senpai seemed to have troubled you in a far way foreign country, so I apologize for that.”

“Senpai...?”

Because the conversation jumped from one subject to another, Ayato was at a loss as he couldn't follow at all.

"Huh, you don't know? Until he dropped out of school, Gustave Malraux was a member of our <Ubermensch^{Tenorio} Faction>. It's already an old story of dozen of years though."

"Gustave Malraux was?"

He did not think that he would hear that name even after returning to Asterisk.

"The data which he left is still useful for the young students. Ah come on, do you remember the dragon-like pseudo life-form which you've played with before? That was a phryganella-type viscous attack body, but it's something created from his data."

"No wonder I thought that the impression was similar..."

As it already came up to there, he was amazed as nothing of what she could say could surprise him anymore.

——Or at least he thought so.

"Ah, not good, not good. I strayed from the topic again. I'm always like that. I'd better get to the main point. If it's me —— Amagiri Ayato, I can cure your big sister."

"——!"

Although Hilda plainly said that, this was an especial shock.

Ayato braced himself, looked into Hilda's eyes and asked.

"Is that true?"

"Kishishishi. It's true. It's a fact and reality."

Hilda squinted and slowly nodded many times.

"It's impossible for Korb-sensei. Sensei was certainly a great person, but I'm afraid to say that he's already become decrepit. In fact, that person wasn't able to cure your big sister even after taking five years. But, but, if it's me, it's possible."

The corners of Hilda's mouth were weirdly lifted up.

At that moment, Ayato remembered a person with the same air as Hilda.

Ernesta Kühne. She is the head of the <Sculptor^{Pygmalion} Faction> in Allekant Academy like Hilda is the head of <Ubermensch^{Tenorio} Faction>

.

However, the two girls' styles were diametrically opposite.

Ernesta was the owner of a will just like the scorching sun, but from Hilda passions like the magma of the dark abyss could be felt

.

"Just... who are you?"

As Ayato once again asked so, Hilda happily repeated.

“I’m Hilda. Hilda Jane Rowlands. President of the Allekant
Academy Research Institute, the <Ubermensch Faction>.”

Then, a horrifying flame glittered in her eyes behind her glasses.

“Among them — some also called me the <Great Doctor>.”

Epilogue

"Then... are you telling us that your father was Gustave's client?"

In front of Ayato and company's concerned amazement, Claudia deeply bowed her head.

"Yes. I am sorry to have caused you trouble. I never thought that my father would take such a reckless action."

Three days later after Ayato's return. When Julis and company came back to Asterisk, Claudia called the four people to the Student Council room and told them about the mastermind of this incident.

"But, why did President's father do such a thing...?"

"It's simple. It's because he will be troubled if I win the <Gryps>. Rather than my father, it's Galaxy though."

Claudia plainly answered Kirin's question.

"...But then, weren't there many other ways to do it?"

"Now is still the stage where Galaxy is planning its course of action to handle me and is considering the kinds of effect it will have by following it. I think that my father wanted to settle it somehow in the meantime. This is because if Galaxy was to seriously make a move, it's my father who understands the most of what will become of me."

At her words, Julis glared at Claudia with sharp eyes.

“Claudia, do you understand what you’re saying? Making an enemy out of Galaxy is in other words, equivalent to making an enemy out of the academy which you belong to — this Seidoukan Academy, you know? On top of that, are you saying that you’ll win through the <Gryps>?”

“You’re right to think of it as reckless. But even so, I do not intend to yield my wish in the least.”

Claudia also glared head on at Julis.

But, Julis’ expression softly loosened before long.

“I thought that you were a cleverer person though.”

“I have only done so because it was necessary.”

Claudia also relaxed and smiled.

“But, I’m going to guess that you won’t challenge them empty-handed, right?”

“Of course. Since I became Student Council President, I have arranged preparations all along for that purpose. Well, there will be nothing I can do if Galaxy becomes serious; but I should be able to gain time before they become serious. The matter of this time will definitely be of help.”

There, Claudia apologetically frowned for the first time.

“But, if you people want to publicly convict my father no matter what, I will not say that that’s unreasonable. Especially if it is Julis whose country was damaged to that extent, I think that it is only natural.”

“.....”

Julis was lost in thought silently for a while, but she slightly shook her head before long.

“No; to be frank, I really want to do so, but such bargaining will be necessary, too, right? And especially from now on.”

Her eyes seemed to gaze not only at the next <Gryps>, but also about things further beyond that.

“...I don’t really mind, too.”

“I’m also fine with it, but...”

Saya nodded in agreement with Julis and Kirin also agreed, but she nervously raised her hand as there was something she wanted to ask.

“In the end, what on earth kind of thing is President’s wish?”

“I will tell you after hearing your reply about the other day’s talk.”

Claudia said that and looked around at the faces of all the people present.

"I also said it a little while ago, but joining my team means that you might make enemy out of Galaxy. Normally thinking, it could not be said to be the best plan. Supposing that I was in your position, I guess that I will probably have declined immediately."

"...And you still intend to invite us?"

Julis smiled wryly as she was amazed.

"Well, whatever. No matter what the circumstances are, when looking at the war potential, these members are attractive. ——I'll join you."

She flatly declared.

"M-Me, too... I'll also join!"

Following Julis, Kirin greatly nodded, too.

"Since I'd watched the previous <Gryps>, I have by all means wanted to fight together with President in the same team...!"

"You two, thank you very much."

After saying so, Claudia turned her gaze to Saya.

"Sasamiya-san, what will you do?"

"Hmm... Honestly, I'm not very interested in the <Gryps>. I'd achieved my duty to my father and it looks like Allekant's puppets won't participate, either."

Because the substitute participation of the autonomous puppets was only a special case measure of the previous <Phoenix>, many viewpoints showed that it would not be permitted this time.

“...Therefore, my answer depends on Ayato.”

When Saya answered so, everyone’s gazes gathered to Ayato.

Ayato had remained silent as is, not uttering even a single word

Even now, he kept silent while looking downward, his mouth tightly closed.

“Ayato... you’re a little strange recently. Did something happen?”

Julis asked as she found it indeed suspicious.

“Your big sister was safe, right?”

Everyone knew the reason why Ayato returned earlier and except for the part about the hospital’s special room, he told them everything.

What he hasn’t told was the talk he had afterwards with Hilda.

“——Julis, I have to talk with you a little later. Is it all right?”

“Y-Yeah. I do not mind, but...”

Julis tilted her head to the side as she looked puzzled.

At her figure, Ayato once again strengthened his resolve and turned around to Claudia.

“I understand. I will also participate in Claudia’s team. And —
— let’s absolutely win the championship.”

References

1. ↑ meaning that Julis had always declined coverage and interview until then
 2. ↑ basically World Dragon bought slots or entries to the < Gryps> from Queen Veil
 3. ↑ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plaice>
 4. ↑ Flora has the habit to call her own name when speaking about herself
 5. ↑ expression meaning saying something awful or speak bitterly of someone or something
 6. ↑ meaning here Sister-in-law
 7. ↑ a mocking proverb, which reveal the laziness of the carrier (in Japanese olden days now we thinks that being lighter is smarter), here to more precise <http://detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp..il/q1387035023>
 8. ↑ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epiphany_\(holiday\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epiphany_(holiday))
 9. ↑ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anemone_coronaria
 10. ↑ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orthrus>
 11. ↑ children here referred to the plants
 12. ↑ remember in vol1 where Ayato saved her from an arrow shoot by Cyrus, she told there that she owe him.
 13. ↑ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lernaeen_Hydra
 14. ↑ here referred to Julis' setting type abilities
 15. ↑ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spartoi>
 16. ↑ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_sword
 17. ↑ Here Maria
 18. ↑ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gothic_Revival_architecture
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